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A WIFE OUT OF EGYPT

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BY

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PREFACE

EGYPT, like Tunis, is still inhabited by a race, neither numerous nor powerful now, which has seen all the dynasties of history come and go. The Copts—an Arab way of saying Egyptians: Egypt is the land of Gypts or Copts—are the descendants of the men who hewed wood and drew water for the Pharaohs, for conquerors like Darius the Persian, the Macedonian Ptolemies, the Romans, and the Arabs, and are the intellectual hewers and drawers of modern Egypt. Like the Berbers of Tunis, they were mightily oppressed by Roman and Byzantine masters for not coming into the orthodox religion; like the Berbers, they thought that their lot could not be worse under the Arab conqueror, and stood by sullenly while their masters were conquered, though their help would have made the Arab conquest impossible.

The Arabs persecuted them in their turn, to make them abandon the feeble and impure stream of Christianity which had trickled down to them direct from St. Mark the Evangelist. But by living like rats in holes, the Copts have defeated their purpose, and remain the professors of the most ancient and debased form of Christianity, but the spiritual descendants, in their own eyes, of the Church of Egypt, immortal as the offspring of St. Mark, and the mother of Athanasius and Cyril and Origen.

Until the Nationalist movement began in the revolt of Arabi Pasha, the Copts or Egyptians and the Arabs kept distinct, but they now all call themselves Egyptians, to prosecute the claim for Egyptian Independence, which is in reality a Pan-Islamic movement into which the Copts have been betrayed. Girgis Boutros, who is one of the chief characters in the story, a very wealthy leader of the Copts, has been entrapped in this way, owing to his hatred of the English.

Side by side with the Copts there is another Arab-speaking Christian community in Egypt, a much fairer and handsomer race, who might often be taken for Europeans—the Syrians. Unlike the Copts, who rarely rise above the position of clerks and book-keepers, they are important in the mercantile community and many of them are very

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wealthy; and, unlike the Copts, they are firm supporters of the British rule, though they are galled by the unwillingness of the English to receive them on terms of social equality.

Hadassah Lekejian, the heroine, and her father and brother are typical Syrians of Egypt.

The plot of this book deals with a subject which previous writers of novels about Egypt have left in the background —the struggle between love and snobbery in the breast of a British officer, who has fallen in love with the beautiful Syrian when he met her, without realizing what her nationality meant in England, and, as he meets her again in Cairo in the position of her fiancé, discovers that she is a member of the ostracized race.

This ostracism is described by Miss Lorimer most convincingly and pitifully. While the reader's feelings are stirred by the beautiful Hadassah's struggle between love of her people and her love for the proud Englishman who insists that she shall give her people up, his interest is riveted on the forces which are working in Egypt—the revengeful Copt's hereditary tendency to betray his fellow-Christians to Islam, and the heartburnings of the Arab-speaking loyalists of Eygpt at their social exclusion by the rulers they serve so faithfully.

Miss Lorimer has long been a student of both Coptic and Mohammedan questions. Her knowledge and intuition with regard to the latter was amply shown in her masterly book "By the Waters of Carthage."

I have no hesitation in pronouncing this a far finer book, immeasurably more interesting as a love story, and full of the psychology which Miss Lorimer has taught us to expect in her books.

In "A Wife out of Egypt," Miss Lorimer has introduced to fiction a singularly beautiful and gifted nation, the Syrians, brought up as Europeans, who are white people in everything but race.

DOUGLAS SLADEN.

A WIFE OUT OF EGYPT

CHAPTER I

A TAXI-CAB drew up sharply at No. 123, Princes Avenue, South Kensington. Out of it jumped a slim girl in rich furs and a young man in faultless afternoon dress.

They were a good-looking couple, and more than one pair of eyes looked enviously at them as they passed.

The girl held out her hand to say good-bye.

"I must *really* go," she said; "and *please* don't wait for me."

"Why mayn't I?"

"Because I should feel I had to hurry."

His eyes besought her.

The girl blushed happily. "No, it's Miss MacNaughtan, and I haven't seen her for almost two years."

"And what about me? . . . In a week's time I won't see you for almost a year."

"I've been with you for hours and hours every day for the last month."

"You've been awfully good, but I'm jealous of every one you want to see very much. . . ." He laughed. "I am a duffer, I know."

"You're the nicest thing in all the world," she said, "and I love you for being jealous."

Her lover had been holding her hand caressingly in his. He felt for the ring on her third finger. "I like to feel it," he said, and remember it's there, as a token you are mine. Sometimes I keep saying to myself, 'Stella's mine,' 'Stella's mine,' 'Stella's mine'!"

"Stella's not yours *yet*," she said tauntingly, but with so much love in her voice that he did not mind.

"Why can't we get married before you go back to Egypt? You could return with your parents, and I would follow later on: no one need know but ourselves."

"What would be the good of that, dear?"

"To make sure of you."

"Don't you trust me?"

"Yes, darling; but I'm always afraid you'll discover how ordinary I am compared with your dear self. You may meet the kind of fellow you imagine I am."

"And throw you over?"

She drew her hand out of his:

"I didn't say that."

"I wonder which of us will be the most changed when we meet." Her finger was on the electric bell as she said the challenging words:

"I won't change, Stella; no jolly fear. Remember, I'm coming for you first thing in the morning: you've got to take me with you wherever you go, shopping or no shopping."

She blew a kiss to him as the door closed.

CHAPTER II

MISS MACNAUGHTAN was sitting in her long drawing-room awaiting the arrival of her ex-pupil Esther Lekejian, or Stella Adair, as she was more familiarly called.

Miss MacNaughtan was American by birth, Scotch by ancestry, and English by adoption. She kept a boarding-school for girls.

Her school was expensive—you had only to take into consideration its charming situation (close to Kensington Gardens, and within a quarter of an hour's walk of one of the most fashionable London churches), and the air of luxury which pervaded the establishment, to gauge that the cost of a single pupil seldom came out at less than three hundred a year.

Yet in spite of the luxury, freedom, and modernity of the school, the girls were not spoilt. If a girl was nice when she came to Miss MacNaughtan, she was much nicer when she left her; if she was horrid when she arrived she was far less horrid when she went away.

She had a genius for discovering the good points in her worst pupils, she had also a genius for teaching them how to make the best of their looks. She declared that no woman who used her wits need ever look plain.

She surrounded her girls with beauty, and she demanded of them their utmost to add to it.

Her school was "a very garden of girls."

When the old butler announced "Miss Lekejian," Miss MacNaughtan rose from her deep-seated chair with the alacrity of a girl in her teens. She held out her arms, and Stella flew into them. For a moment neither spoke, for the girl was in tears—tears of joy at finding herself once more in the old room, surrounded by the dear familiar objects, and in the arms of her darling "Naughtie."

Miss MacNaughtan loosened her embrace and held Stella back from her. She looked at her carefully, then

pulled her face towards her own again and kissed it. "Just what I expected, dear."

Stella gave a slight start. Did Naughtie guess that she had dared to love some one whom "Naughtie" had never seen, after the thousands of times she had said that she must find her a lover, because she always discovered the best and nicest sort of people in the world? "What did you expect?" asked Stella a little nervously.

Miss MacNaughtan laughed at her old pupil's anxious face: "I expected beauty and tenderness and passion."

She led the girl to a sofa whose cushioned seat was so deep and ample that they sank into it as though it were a feather mattress.

With a motherly laugh Miss MacNaughtan wiped away Stella's tears.

"Oh! Naughtie, I knew I'd cry when I saw you, and now that everything is just the same—this heavenly sofa, the bowls of red roses, and the beloved pictures, and the cool walls, and oh! just everything, I want to go on crying more than ever."

"But, Stella, you've had a lovely time, you've been presented to three queens and seen almost all the world, and . . ."

"But not my own country; I wouldn't go there. I wouldn't go to it as a globe-trotter or as a tourist."

Miss MacNaughtan dropped her eyes as Stella went on: "And, after all, you've been there without me. It was too bad: you promised to keep Egypt until I could receive you there in my own home."

"The opportunity came, child, and I took it. One of the parents paid for everything. I took his two daughters up the Nile as far as Abu Simbel."

Stella's eyes shone. "Was it glorious? I've seen Abu Simbel in my dreams a thousand times; did you love it? Did you enjoy Cairo? I'm burning to go there. Did you meet any of my people—my cousin Girgis? His mother has a big house in Cairo; I can just remember its lovely Arab hall."

She was looking at her old schoolmistress eagerly, and as she looked a note of anxiety crept into her voice. "Why do you look like that, Naughtie? Were you not happy in Egypt? Did it overpower you?—you always said it would. Were you disappointed?"

Miss MacNaughtan laughed: "No, dear, I was *not* disappointed. . . ."

"Then why do you evade my eyes?" The girl pulled her teacher's face towards her. Their eyes met.

"Tell me why you didn't like Egypt," persisted Stella.

"But I did like Egypt."

"Then tell me what you wish to hide about Egypt?"

Miss MacNaughtan laughed her kind laugh, "How my pupil has learned to dictate? . . . I have nothing to hide, only I think you are expecting too much . . . too much, I mean, of Cairo. You can't expect too much of the Nile, but remember your home is in Cairo, which is a very different thing."

The girl's radiant face clouded. "Why am I expecting too much? Isn't it what Lane says—the most mediæval city in the world? I don't suppose I was ever allowed to go into the native parts, but I have read and read about it. And then the things one doesn't read about—the gaiety and the pleasure-loving life the people lead. . . I love dancing; I've become awfully frivolous, Naughtie."

"I'm so glad, Baby": the old name slipped out from habit, for Stella had been given over to Miss MacNaughtan's care when she was only seven years old. The schoolmistress had been urged and persuaded to take the child by a tie of friendship which went very deep.

Stella's father was a wealthy Syrian living in Cairo. Her mother, who was Irish by birth, determined that her child should be educated in Europe, and so, through the influence of an old friend, Stella was received into Miss MacNaughtan's school. Every summer her father and mother had come to England and had taken their only daughter for her holidays either to Scotland, or to the high hill-towns of Italy, or to France. The rest of her holidays she had spent with Miss MacNaughtan, or with some friend of Miss MacNaughtan's, and, when she was old enough, with chosen school-friends. The girl who was lucky enough to carry off Stella Adair as holiday visitor wore a sort of halo in the school for the next term.

Stella was all that a school demands of its leader. She was beautiful, or so they thought; she was high-spirited, she was clever and imaginative. But it was her extraordinary gift of languages which placed her on the altar of genius. Her parents talked Italian to her during her holidays in Italy, though they spoke Arabic in their home life, and she had spent long summers with them in Germany. At school her nurse was French. er weekly letters from home were always in Arabic. During her tour round the world, which she had just accomplished, with her parents, she had insisted upon speaking Arabic, for she was distressed to find that she had become almost a stranger to the spoken language. The classic language which is used in writing is scarcely understood by the uneducated classes or by any class who have only heard the

spoken language. Of Syria she rarely thought. Egypt had been the land of her people for many generations, yet of modern and social Egypt she knew nothing. She could study its ancient mysteries and cults in museums or in books. She had attended classes at the London College, and she had paid generous fees to the best lady guides who conduct strangers round the Egyptian portion of the British Museum.

Miss MacNaughtan in her brief tour up the Nile had felt its spell and reverenced its omnipotence, but her fortnight's residence in Cairo had taught her many things which hurt her big nature when she thought of her charming pupil, and how bitterly her years of waiting for the land of her adoption were to be repaid.

She had learned that in Cairo, Stella, the pride of her school, the baby of her motherless heart, the child whom she had reared to such splendid womanhood, would be to all intents and purposes a social outcast. She had learned that a cruel deception had been practised on the girl who had been reared in the belief that for her life would be a splendid thing, that the lavish expenditure of money, affection, and social training which had been bestowed upon her was to fit her for a life which would make great demands upon her intellectually as well as socially. All this now struck the woman who had mothered her and guarded her as an act of cruelty.

Miss MacNaughtan said nothing of all that was passing in her own mind. Stella repeated the words, "Half of my nature's very frivolous."

"I am so glad, dear. When girls can't be frivolous I'm always afraid; they generally become cranks or marry undesirables."

"Naughtie, how like you! What principles you teach!"

They both laughed.

"All I know is, dear," the older woman said, "that I always think twice before I allow a serious girl any liberty."

"Had you ever any trouble with me?"

"Not in that way, dear," Miss MacNaughtan laughed.

The girl hugged her lovingly. "It was because you trusted me so completely."

Stella rose from the sofa. "I love your black cushions. They're new, aren't they? And the carpet—how clever you are about colour! This room's like a cool garden with roses and green lawns." She pulled Miss MacNaughtan out of her seat.

The girl gazed round the room. "It's delightful. . . . What a dear room for girls to live in, Naughtie; and I took it all for granted . . . but now that I've stayed for

weeks and weeks in vulgar hotels and poor inns and pensions, I can realize all that you gave us. But do come and let me go over every inch of the house . . . . I must pay a visit to the kitchens. Are they all here still? I spoke to Clarkie" (Stella had labelled the butler Clarkson, because he wore a wig).

"Yes, they're all here. My servants never seem to want a change."

The girl laughed. "I shouldn't think they did want a change: you over-feed them, and over-pay them, and over-consider them."

"But they do their work."

"They know that even though you spoil people, Naughtie, you mean them to do their duties."

"Have I spoilt you? Are my girls spoilt?"

Stella turned swiftly and impulsively hugged her. "No, they're not; and I hope I'm not. But oh, Naughtie, how I've wanted to meet some one as vital and alive and keen as you are! You've spoilt all other women for me."

Miss MacNaughtan laughed: "But not other men!"

Over the girl's face a warmer tint dyed the pale, pure skin. "Come and let's look at my old bedroom," she said, "And the blue drawing-room—is it still blue?" Miss MacNaughtan nodded, "yes." "And the concert-hall!"

"Oh, how lovely!" she cried, as she followed Miss MacNaughtan into the blue drawing-room. It was still blue, but glorious touches of colour had been added to it since Stella's day, and a frieze of old Japanese prints, whose predominating note was orange, ran round the room.

The girl put her arm again through Miss MacNaughtan's. "Naughtie, why did I ever grow up? I do so want to come back . . . . I want the wonderful mixture of intellectual food and humanity that you put into life."

"But, dear, you're coming into so much, you can do and see anything you care about."

"But it's your mind and vitality that suggests and invests these things with interest. Other people let things slip past, other people live in grooves; I know I'll do the same."

Miss MacNaughtan looked at her. "I don't think you will, honey; but if you do, remember grooves are very comfortable things."

The girl was pulling off her left glove very slowly. "You used to make me think that I would never want to marry. I used to say that I would live just like you, enjoying men's society freely and liking them just enough and no more than to make life agreeable. But lately . . ." Stella had pulled off her glove, her hand was thrust sud-

denly before Miss MacNaughtan's eyes, a sob broke her voice: "Naughtie, I do hope you'll like him!"

"My dear," the older woman said, while her arms clasped the girl eagerly to her: "Has my baby found her other half? . . . *Is* he the other half God made for my baby—are you sure?"

"I don't know," the girl said. "I don't really know, but I'm sure I love him!"

"But why don't you know, dear?"

"I can't tell; I don't even know if I understand him: but he adores me, and I love to be adored!"

"Who is he? . . . do I know him?"

"He's the brother of Nancy Thorpe. I've been staying with her people; he was there."

Miss MacNaughtan's eyes looked troubled.

Nancy Thorpe had been at her school for four years, She belonged to one of the oldest of Norfolk families. As a race the Thorpes were arrogant and family-proud. The men were good-looking and selfish, the women lovely and reckless.

"Do you know what he said when I promised to marry him, Naughtie? That he had never been conceited before, but that now he would never be un-conceited again." He never believes I can be in earnest about my love for him because, he says, he's such an ordinary sort of a duffer."

"Is he ordinary? . . . Ordinary from your intellectual standpoint?"

The girl paused. "He's frightfully good-looking, at least *I* think so. And about his own job he knows far more than I do."

"Well, let us hope so. What is his own job?"

"He's a soldier."

'And about the things you care for that are *not* his own job . . . have you much in common?"

The girl's eyes dropped. "I don't know," she said. "I really *don't* know, for we were in love with each other too soon to find out, and when we're together, that's just enough! . . . It was only when I was coming to you to-day that I kept wondering what I should tell you about him: it made me ask myself what I did know about him except the fact that I love him." The girl's voice broke. "And you led me to think that . . ." she paused, "that . . . a woman loved a man and wished to give herself to him because he responded to all the *intellectual* interests in her nature as well as the other feelings, because he awakened new qualities in her, because she admired him—oh! I don't know how to express all you taught me to expect, and now it isn't like that . . . not a bit like that?"

"What is it like?"

"It's like something you don't understand, something that has no reason in it: you just love because you can't help yourself . . . it takes possession of you."

"I think it's the real thing, dear child. I can teach my bairns lots of things, but no one can teach them what only God knows—which halves fit into which."

The girl's eyes were full of gratitude. "I think he was meant for me, Naughtie, for we loved each other right away, and I feel quite unworthy of *him*, and he feels himself horribly unworthy of me, so it sounds all right. I ought to be grateful to you for having made me what I am . . . the kind of me that he thinks so wonderful."

"Dear child, I had splendid ground to cultivate; . . . I can take very little credit to myself; . . . but I should like to see your man."

"So you will. May I bring himhere on Sunday night?"

"Yes, dear, bring him. When are you to be married?"

"Oh!" the girl cried. "I don't know . . . give me breathing time . . .. I'm going to Cairo next week—I want to know something about my home before he comes out; his regiment's going there next winter . . . it will be about nine months until we meet: he wants me to marry him immediately, before we leave London."

"Has he met your mother? Does he know your people?" Miss MacNaughtan tried to hide the anxious note in her voice.

"Oh, yes, he adores mother; often I feel quite jealous of her . . . she looks so young and pretty, all men admire her; she often finds things out about Vernon that I don't know."

Miss MacNaughtan pulled the girl's ear. "You haven't time!"

At that moment Clarkson appeared.

"Well, Clarkson?"

"Please, m'm, have you forgotten there is a committee meeting at 6.30?"

Miss MacNaughtan gave one of her youthful laughs. "Have they been waiting long?"

"Only five minutes, m'm, but I thought I'd better tell you."

"Tell them I'll be down in two minutes."

She crossed the room hurriedly, calling: "Good-bye, dear. Sunday night—mind you bring him . . . let yourself out, won't you? . . . my notes are downstairs."

As Miss MacNaughtan disappeared Stella laughed to herself. "Just the same as ever," she said, "the darling!" Always doing ten times more than any other woman,

and always with spare time to see her tiresome, adoring pupils.

She flung herself down on the sofa.

For a moment she tried to think of herself back into the peace of the old school-days, the peace of a life which, with all its gaities and interests, had held none of the new passion which had awakened in her.

In a few moments Clarkson opened the drawing-room door again. When he saw the girl's attitude he withdrew.

Stella called after him. "Clarkie, come back! I'm so happy! I'm going to be married."

"No, miss!"

"Yes, Clarkson; why not?"

"H'excuse me, miss, I forgot; you see it was h'only yesterday that you was a baby, miss."

The girl laughed. . . . "How's your wife, Clarkson!"

"That's what I came about, please, miss; you see she can't walk, and she'll not be contented with all that I can tell her—she'll want to know h'everything."

"About what, Clarkson?"

"About *you*, miss—h'every single thing. . . ." He paused.

"Do you want me to go and see her?"

"I wasn't thinking of h'asking h'any such thing, miss."

"Of course I'll go, Clarkie. . . . Does she live in the same place . . . ?"

"Yes, miss, number h'eight, 'arrington Mews, but I couldn't have you go round there alone, miss. I had only come h'up to h'ask you please, if you had such a thing as a picture of yourself you could let me show my missus. I'd take h'every care of it, miss."

"Why, Clarkie, I'll take her my photograph for herself. Tell her I'll come on Sunday afternoon, and I'll bring the gentleman I'm going to marry."

"Ho, miss"—something very like tears rolled down the old man's face—"you are not h'altered, not one h'atom. Thank you, miss; I'll tell her that; shall I call a taxi, miss?"

Stella was putting on her gloves. "Look, Clarkson, there's my ring."

The old man stepped politely forward to look at the odd-looking ring: it was one made after Stella's own fancy. "Very nice, miss, h'Im sure, but you h'always had beautiful rings."

"But this one is a special ring, and so to me it is specially beautiful. I suppose my young man is just a fine young man like so many other fine young men . . . to me he is quite different."

"That's right, miss, that's 'ow I knew it would be some day, though it does seem strange to a man as 'ow as beautiful a young lady as you, miss, and as clever a young lady, should ever come to look upon an h'ordinary young chap like that."

The girl laughed delightedly. "That's your veneration for our sex, Clarkson. Vernon's so good-looking that lots of women will wonder how it was that he ever came to look upon an ordinary girl like myself."

"Ho no, miss!" Clarkson's voice was reproachful. Miss Stella had been Miss MacNaughtan's most admired pupil, she was now a creature of such refined and unusual beauty, that she had no right to speak of herself as an "h'ordinary" girl.

CHAPTER III

Two days later Clarkson showed Stella and her lover into Miss MacNaughtan's drawing-room. As he closed the door behind them and walked slowly down the wide stairway, he said to himself: "Good-looking young chap enough, but Gawd, 'ow h'ordinary!"

And that was just what Miss MacNaughtan thought of him.

"Physically, one of England's finest specimens, but mentally—Gawd, 'ow h'ordinary!"

Yet when her pupil followed her into her little ante-room on some feeble pretext to ask her what she thought of him, she answered "Delightful, quite a prince charming." With his fair colouring, frank English eyes and faultless figure, she might well say he was charming, for he had the distinction of the Thorpe breeding, and she had no reason for thinking him stupid, for as she touched upon a score of subjects he made keen and apt observations. Yet in her heart she had labelled him, as Clarkson had, "h'ordinary."

During the interview Egypt and more had become the topic of conversation. Stella had laughingly told her lover that Miss MacNaughtan did not care for Cairo. "She thinks the English in Cairo either bores or snobs."

"In what way?" Vernon asked. He turned to Miss MacNaughtan . . . he hoped she didn't think they ought to hob-nob with the natives . . . (He hadn't the slightest idea of what he really meant by the word natives, whether Mohammedans, Copts, Greeks, or Persians; he was totally ignorant of the wonderfully heterogeneous mixture of races which make up the human scum of Cairo). By heredity he had the strongest feelings, which had as yet

been untouched, as to who were fit for Englishmen to associate with in foreign countries.

He had failed to remember, after his first introduction to Stella, that she was Syrian by birth. He admired her mother, who was Irish. He had forgotten her father was a Syrian so completely that Miss MacNaughtan's words did not suggest anything uncomfortable. Stella had certainly nothing in the world to do with his preconceived idea of "natives." Natives were, to his very Saxon mind, beings absolutely beneath him; while Stella, he had the grace to feel, was far above him! He thought of her with pride, he thought of her with self-satisfaction. The knowledge that she loved him gave him a new belief in himself.

Vernon was one of the unimaginative Englishmen whose good looks are accentuated by Saxon colouring and an almost Hellenic devotion to physical training. What he had really thought out for himself and believed in, and what was merely the result of caste, it is hard to say. Like most Englishmen he expressed himself as seldom as possible on any subject that mattered. His mind never wandered into abstract paths; but he had the desired characteristics of an Englishman,—grit enough to endure hardships without grousing, and courage enough to know fear and face it. He had not the highly-developed sensibilities of the Latin races, but his sense of honour and for all that comes within an Englishman's understanding of that virtue, was very much alive.

He had been taught, as all English boys are taught, that the telling of a lie is a crime; he had not been taught its equivalent in the Latin mind—the sin of hurting another's feelings.

So he belonged to the countless class of Englishmen who show all human beings who are not of the Western world that he scorns them, who would rather make his friends uncomfortable than tell a lie.

Miss MacNaughtan's answer to Vernon's question was equivocating and unprovocative of further comment.

She was glad to change the subject, for her wide experience of human character told her that this typical Anglo-Saxon, who had fallen in love with her highly-gifted pupil, was as full of inherited prejudices as an Oriental is full of superstitions.

To herself she declared: "He ought to marry a fair English woman who would perpetuate his pink complexion and race, and not one who would taint it with the passion and pain of the pale children of the East, whose forefathers knew and followed 'the Man of Sorrows who was acquainted with grief.'"

CHAPTER V

STELLA had been in Egypt for almost a year ; in another week her lover would arrive.

She was sitting in the garden of her beautiful home, thinking over all that had happened since her arrival in Cairo, of all the scales that had fallen from her eyes !

She felt a hundred years older and a thousand times less in love with humanity generally. The time had passed very quickly, because everything had been new to her, and her home-life was delightful. If there was nothing else to please her in Egypt, surely this garden with its exquisite pergolas and Eastern kiosks of old grey wood, its mysterious devices for the introducing of water-courses and artificial lakes, its odorous orchards of rare fruits and scented shrubs, was sufficient. It was lovely and mysterious enough to gratify any Eastern princess. But in it Stella still felt herself strangely Western : things had not grown familiar to her with the familiarity of a native land. The very servants in her mother's house appeared to her impossible as servants, they were the adjuncts of an Eastern tableau.

But it was not the strangeness of things which had produced the feeling of age and bitterness in her heart ; it was not the mystery of Egypt, with its power of the Unseen and its terrorising sense of Age—it was something wholly modern and unexpected.

It was the finding of herself little better than a social outcast amongst the people who were the Power for Good in Egypt, amongst the people of a nation who had spoiled her and courted her and reared her in their bosom. As yet she had not mentioned a word of her feelings upon the subject to her people. She loved them too much, and her devotion to ngland forbade it.

" There must be some reason, there must be something more than I know ! " she had often said to herself.

There was a great deal more than she knew, only she had imagined that the fault lay with her own family, that there was some hidden skeleton about which every one knew but herself.

Her brother was the only person to whom she could speak on the subject, but there was something about his personality and expression which told her that he had lived his suffering down, that he had made a world for himself above the petty snobbery of race prejudice. that he did not wish to re-open the old wound.

She was sitting in the coolest spot in the garden, for the November sun was warmer than any sun she had known in urope : in her white frock she looked a delightful picture of luxurious girlhood. To-day there was a subject she had to think out and settle quite definitely.

"Salome" was to be performed at the Opera that evening. It was the opening night of the season ; she longed to go. So far she had only been t one or two social functions in Cairo—they did not bear thinking about! . . . Would the opera be a repetition ?

Then there was Vernon ! He would be in Cairo in a week. Did he know ? Did he understand ? Would he have courage ? The "something" in her heart which made her fear, instead of rejoice, at the nearness of his coming made her hunger all the more for an instant proof of his devotion, for an instant proof of his *dis*regard for the prejudices of his race.

She did not allow herself to frame any definite fear in connection with his arrival. His letters were everything that her all or nothing nature could desire ; they surely ought to have drowned the whispering voice of fear. Yet the whispering voice told her that as Hadassah Lekejian in Cairo she was a very different person from the Stella he had known. She had been christened Esther, but her father liked to call her Hadassah, the old Persian rendering of the Biblical Esther. In England she had been known as Stella Adair. Would Vernon feel as proud to say, "Hadassah is mine ! Hadassah is mine !" as he had been to repeat to himself, "Stella is mine ! Stella is mine ?" Then she remembered how something unknown in her had said, "I am not yours yet ! I wonder which of us will have changed the most when we meet."

Nicolas, her brother, was coming towards her ; his good looks thrilled her with pride ; he was a delightful person to own for a brother. She had seen so little of him during her years at school that she was quite unprepared, on her arrival in Cairo, for the pleasure his personality afforded her. Since she had left Miss MacNaughtan's school, in her travels round the world, or during her visits to her m ny friends, she had met no one who was her brother's equal in intellectual refinement or good looks. With all the warmth of her ungrudging nature she lready adored him. He was equally proud of his sister.

Nicolas sat himself down beside her, and as he did so he laid a small roll of music in (manuscript) and a spray of tuberose on her lap. She lifted the white flower to her nostrils, and softly and sensuously drew in its luscious fragrance.

"Is it finished?" she said; her eyes fell on the MS.

"Not quite, but I've *ot* it . . . it's there"—he touched the roll with his sensitive fingers—"it's there; I can't lose it now. I've only to elaborate on the theme."

"How splendid!" she said. "Shall I play it for you?"

Not yet, it's too rough." He sighed heavily.

"You're tired—" she said.

"A little," he answered, "I'm going for a ride; now that's off my mind I feel free."

He rose to go. She knew the words he had come to say were still unspoken. With his back turned to her he said: "What about to-night, Stella?"

"Are we going?" she said.

"Do you want to?"

"I want to hear 'Salome.'"

He suddenly swung round. "Go," he said, "For the little mother's sake go, and you will soon grow to feel as I do."

"Oh, Nicolas!"

"I lived in Germany and France for seven years; I understand. I was so well off that I was a little king there. I forgot all about Cairo."

She caught his hand. "You are a king anywhere." She stood up beside him . . . he put his arm tenderly round her waist, and looked at her with almost a lover's devotion. "We're rather a nice-looking couple," she said laughingly . . . her voice faltered . . . "yet we might be lepers!"

"Hush!" he said. "Don't. She's borne it all her life without *one* word."

"How she must have loved him!"

"He's been worth it . . .!" the words were spoken with asperity.

Stella dropped her eyes. She had not learnt yet the true worth of her father's nature—his incorruptibleness in a corrupt land; his sense of justice, which had never been blinded by the injustices perpetrated against him; and, best of all, his sincerity as a Christian. Nicolas understood all these things, and often wondered in his heart at his father's gentleness of speech, his generosity of purpose.

"Here comes mother," he said. He looked at the girl with eyes which asked for thoughtfulness for the creature he adored.

Stella rose to meet her mother: her brother sauntered off with his music in his hand. In the distance there was the tum-tumming of the Nile-man's drum and the clearer note of the bottle-and-key. Overhead, in the unbroken blue of the November sky, birds like falcons were swirling

and turning in the sunlight. Mother and daughter met under the ancient wood-work of the long pergola, which had turned to the colour of grey sandstone under the fierce sun of Egypt.

"I came to ask you, dear, if you would like to go to 'Salome' to-night . . . your father will 'phone for seats. Girgis is coming to dinner—he could go with us."

There was silence for a moment. . . . Stella had never met Girgis Boutros, her full cousin, a wealthy young Syrian cotton-farmer of the Fayyum. He had been visiting some freshly-acquired property in Upper Egypt.

"Of course, dearest, I'd like to go." The girl spoke hurriedly and with emphasis. Her mother might have thought that her delay in answering was due to her desire to refuse. "I was just wondering how I shall like Girgis, what I shall think of my rich cousin."

"He is remarkably handsome."

"Is he at all like Nicolas?"

"Oh, no!"

The girl looked at her mother. "We are first cousins?"

"Girgis takes after his father's people."

"Is he like father at all?"

Stella's father was not an ordinary Syrian; he was of average height and build, with almost a patriarchal type of feature. His eyes and the shape of his fine head stamped him as a man of individuality and influence.

"In *looks* he is not the least like your father . . . yet . . . he has his ability."

"What is he like?" Stella was wondering how he would look at the opera, how he would be dressed, and how he would behave.

"He's like one of the portraits cut in relief on the limestone walls at Abydos."

"They are portraits of Egyptians; he's a Syrian."

"Only on his mother's side; you forget, his father was a Copt, one of the purest of all the Egyptian types."

"Oh!" Stella said, but her acclamation was expressive of much which her mother understood.

"Is he very Eastern?"

"Yes, very . . . of the finest type."

"You see, mum, dear, I know so little about my own people. I've been almost a year in Egypt and I have only met a few."

"Scarcely any, dear." She took her daughter's slender hand in hers and caressed it. "Sometimes I wonder if I acted unwisely, Stella."

For a moment the girl thought her mother referred to her own marriage with her father, but it was only for a

moment; the next she realized that she was alluding to her own education in Europe, to the wisdom of having cut her off from her father's people. Stella knew that her mother had cut herself off from her *own* people when she married Nicolas Lekejian, but she had thought, until her own arrival in Cairo, that it was on account of her mother's refusal to marry a cousin who was heir to the entailed property which she as a girl could not inherit. As Helen Adair, she had abhorred him, as she had learnt to abhor her people for wishing to marry her to him, and for ignoring the husband whom she loved. So their name was never mentioned by her, although her daughter had used her mother's maiden name during her upbringing in England, because it was more easily pronounced and saved trouble.

"I'll soon get to know and love them all," Stella said.

The eyes of Irish blue, which were still as bright as Stella's dark ones, smiled eloquently. "Girgis is a splendid fellow." We'll go and visit his home in the Fayyum quite soon. I'd like you to see how modern he is in his ideas, and how devoted he is to his work. I've a great admiration for Girgis."

"I'd love to go; the Fayyum is one of the most beautiful of the ancient oases, isn't it? And Crocodilopolis lies close to it?"

"Yes, and Lake Moeris."

"Oh," Stella said, "what a lot there is to see! . . . How thankful we ought to be that we're not tourists who have to 'do it' all in a certain length of time."

The words built up a silence between them again, for the word "tourist" brought to the girl's mind the memory of all the visitors to Egypt she had seen and met at the two social functions to which she had so eagerly gone the winter before on her arrival—the functions at which she had been left standing by her mother's side as though she was not fit to be introduced to the moneyed Americans and brainless English women who fly to Egypt every winter merely to enjoy the balls and gaieties which are given by hotel-keepers. Stella's mother's mind was working in the same direction. She was recalling the look of wonder and indignation in her daughter's eyes when the truth of the situation had slowly dawned upon her—that they were not "in society" in Cairo, that the "right people" did not know them—that she, Stella Adair, the spoilt darling of Miss MacNaughtan's school, that she, Hadassah Lekejian, as her father loved to call her, was not received by the relatives of the very girls to whom she had been the adored "Head" at school. In Cairo the

same families who had thought it an honour to entertain her as their daughter's schoolfellow would shrink from her in her own home.

The mother recalled their drive together after the reception through the crowded streets of Cairo, ringing with Oriental yells and swarming with Oriental loungers, and across the Nile bridge with its multitudes of Eastern races of widely different types, and on to the quieter banks of the river, where the tall masts of the native boats looked like thickets of slender trees against the burning glory of the setting sun. She recalled the silence of the girl, how her eyes had stared, as though transfixed, into the wild flames which branched through the heavens from the sinking sun.

Not one word had been spoken by mother or daughter during that drive, not one word had been said since in reference to that afternoon. But it was the last social function Stella had consented to attend.

And now Mrs. Lekejian was going to take her to the opera, she was going to crucify her again. But it had to be done: the girl must know everything before her lover arrived.

Stella saw her father coming towards them. She had not got accustomed to his habitual wearing of the scarlet tarbush which every one employed in the Khedivial service in Egypt is compelled to wear; Nicolas Lekejian wore his at all times and in all places, as Syrians and Egyptians always do. Nicolas, his son, always wore a European hat. As he approached his wife and daughter he said, "I can't wait, dear, I must know about the opera. Am I to order seats?"

"Oh, yes!"—it was Stella who answered—"we want to go so much."

"That's all I wished to know," he said. "I've no time for talk." He unwound his daughter's fingers from his left wrist. They were speaking Arabic: it was their custom to do so when Nicolas the elder was present—Stella said it was the effect of the tarbush.

"Let go, temptress," he said, "and allow your father to get back to his work."

His eyes were bright with the pride he felt . . . like the Esther of old she must surely "obtain favour in the sight of all the world."

"But I want you to stay: do stay and tell me about things; almost everything I see needs explaining . . . even yet."

Her father was pleased that she should desire his company, but he remained firm. "I must go, Hadassah;

there are a thousand and one things which have to be done before lunch."

She lifted her retaining fingers from his wrist. "Then may I go and wander about alone?" she said . . . "Can I go later on to the Market of the Afternoon?"

"Take Yehla."

The girl frowned. "Can't I go *alone*, father? Can't I be free? . . . It isn't like the bazaars: the market's quite open, it's right under the Citadel."

"Yehla won't interfere?"

"He chatters . . . he's there . . . I am guarded . . . Oh, dad!"—she broke into English—"you must let me go out alone. I've always done it . . . even at school."

"You can't in this country."

"Why not?"

"Mohammedans don't understand any freedom for women."

"They must be taught."

"Not by my daughter."

"Is it only the Mohammedans?" Her eyes searched his for the truth. "Are the Christians clean-mouthed, clean-minded?"

He remembered that she could understand almost all the languages spoken in Cairo except Greek and Persian.

"No, unfortunately not."

"Are all Orientals the same?"

"Generally speaking, yes." He saw that her face had changed, her soft smiles had vanished. She remained silent.

"I'm sorry, Hadassah; I know you miss your freedom, but I couldn't allow it . . . you will understand better later on; take Yehla with you when your mother can't go."

"Yes," she said, "I will take Yehla: . . . I am learning very quickly."

At the end of the grey pergola she left her parents abruptly. Her mother returned to the house with her father. When they were out of sight, in a sudden fit of remorse for the coldness in her voice and bearing, Stella flung herself down on a seat of white marble, and put her hands before her eyes.

She had to shut out the glory of the East from her sight, the profusion of flowers in the garden, the soaring minarets in the distance where the city lay bathed in light, the turquoise-blue of the fellahin's jebbas, the whiteness of their turbaned heads: she put her thumbs on her ears and deadened the sound of the ancient call to prayer floating over the land like a message from heaven. As the praying figures rose from their knees and the Moham-

medans resumed their toil of drawing water from the sighing sakiyas, Stella cried :

" Is it all sham ? Is this spirit of holiness quite hollow ? Is the East really polluted ? Is that why the English reject us ? " She thought of Italy, of Spain, of the Latin countries generally, where almost the same restrictions for women prevail. Even in these countries she had found it difficult to walk about alone, yet they were different ! There was something in the East which was grosser, something which was *un*elevated by romance, and that the grossness was not restricted to the Moslems ; who have retained the ancient opinion of the chief object of women—hurt her unspeakably.

The bitter knowledge had come to her during these nine strange months, that if her father had been a follower of Mohammed's teachings instead of Christ's, he would have been more respected. She had quickly learnt that the Christian-English in Egypt despise the Eastern-Christians, and whether they had not a right to despise them was a question she was afraid to ask herself. In her own home her father would have none but Christian servants, Copts and Syrians and Italians, although it was acknowledged that her father in his business, and her mother in her domestic rule, suffered severely from the fact. " If we do not employ Christian servants," Nicolas Lekejian had often said to his wife, " who will ? And until they are employed as universally as the Mohammedans, and have been *trusted* for as many generations as they have been *doubted*, they will continue to live up to the bad name they have been given. They have been treated like criminals for centuries, they have been despised and rejected of men ; what can you expect ? " Until the era of English rule in Egypt, Christians were compelled to wear a distinguishing mark, which precluded them from enjoying the privileges of ordinary citizens or engaging in the commerce open to the Moslems. They suffered humiliation and degradation, which eventually corrupted their natures and all but killed the true spirit of the religion to which they have so tenaciously clung for nineteen centuries. Its beauty, the spiritual meaning of its doctrines has hardly survived centuries of bitter wrongs.

Stella realised that the Copts in Egypt know scarcely anything about Christ or His teachings ; that they had clung with a blind adherence to the dogmas of the Church which had been developed out of Christ's teachings by His disciples in the first centuries after His death. She knew that Coptic customs and Coptic ideas, apart from religious matters, are almost identical with those of the

Mohammedans. She realised that their moral deterioration, their cringing attitude was due to the suffering and oppression they had endured for the sake of a depraved Christianity, which taught them less about Christ than Mohammed had taught his followers of Christ.

It had been gall and wormwood to Stella's soul to discover that her father's people belonged to a servile race, a mixed race, a Semitic race, a race which had known oppressive rulers ever since the Biblical days of Assyrian and Babylonian invasions.

She realised that she had no race and no country; for the history of Syria leaves not so much pure blood in its people as the history of Egypt, where the Copts are the almost undiluted descendants of the ancient Egyptians. Up till now she had looked upon Egypt as her country; for her people had lived there for many generations, and in ancient history Syria was dependent upon Egypt for a very long period.

The attitude of the English rulers of the land towards the Syrians came as a shock to her. They were aliens and undesirable invaders; they were called Levantines!

Her thoughts quickly travelled over the ancient history of her own land to the time when the Greeks of Antioch had introduced into it their art and culture. The Syrians imbibed the higher beauty of Greek art, which was reinforced by Roman influence, until Christian Syria was at one time the seat of advanced culture.

"In those days," Stella said to herself, "Vernon's people were barbarians. In the days when Damascus and Antioch were famous as the trading centres of the whole world, the Romans were thrusting their yoke upon the half-savage Britons." Yet these very people amongst whom she had been reared, and whom she had learnt to love, were opening her eyes to the fact that the ancient races of the world—the races who had given it its first civilisation and culture—were unclean.

She knew that in her own nature there was, mixed up with the Eastern blood of her father, the Celtic blood of her mother. The independence of the Irish race was very strong in her; its revolutionary spirit had more dominating qualities than the servile nature of her oft-conquered forefathers.

To-night she would meet her cousin Girgis Boutros for the first time; to-night she would realise how wholly apart from the British she was in Cairo, how closely linked to the native life of Egypt—for Girgis Boutros was uninfluenced by Western thought. Save for his knowledge of the English language, learnt for commercial purposes

at the Coptic school in the Fayyum, and his faultlessly cut clothes, he was free from the affectations of the wealthy Copts, who would gladly be mistaken for English.

CHAPTER V

STELLA was waiting in the drawing-room of her mother's house for the arrival of her cousin Girgis Boutros. Her brother was with her. She was playing over the very difficult composition he had shown her in the garden. He was standing behind her, looking over her shoulder.

"It's *awfully* difficult; you must have patience," she said.

"You make me realise it: for if difficult to you, I'm afraid it's hopeless for ordinary people."

She had turned round to speak to him, and had seen his look, expressive of admiration. "Play it over to me," she said, "so as to give me the 'feeling' of it."

Nicolas sat down on the piano-stool which she had vacated.

He played over his composition with expression and charm, but with little execution.

"It's delightful," Stella said—"perfectly delightful It's full of the East. How did you get it?"

"I can play to you," he said, "and to people I'm in sympathy with; but I'm no pianist: when I sit down in front of business men or critics I can't play a note."

"Let me play it again," she said affectionately.

He took her two hands in his and made her face him. "Let me look at you, Stella . . . that dress is charming; *you* are charming to-night."

"Do you like it?" she said. "I'm so glad—it's very simple."

He laughed. "I know that kind of simplicity—it belongs to the Rue de la Paix. I mean it's certainly *not* Levantine!"

Her soft mouth hardened. "I hope not. *Do* I look Levantine?"

"Don't. . . ." He put his arm round her. "You mustn't get bitter, Stella—it isn't worth it."

"What isn't?"

"The opinion of the British!"

"Vernon is British."

Nicolas did nor answer.

"*You* like them? You *admire* them in spite of their treatment of us?"

"Not wholesale . . . not their prejudices."

"What, then?"

"Their honour . . . their justice, their clean-mindedness, their dislike of intrigue."

The door opened.

Girgis Boutros was shown in. He was in exquisitely cut evening dress. His tarbush of bright scarlet set off the brilliance of his splendid eyes; its straight line increased the statuesqueness of his strong and clearly moulded features; its colour threw up the glitter of his perfect teeth and curly black hair, cut very short. It was dry, stubborn hair, expressive of an active temperament.

Stella thought she had never seen any living creature so nearly perfect in figure and feature. Beside him Nicolas looked French and delicate.

Mrs. Lekejian followed her nephew into the room. She was anxious to see the effect his appearance would have upon her daughter.

The introduction took place in Arabic.

Girgis said, "How do you do?" in stilted English to Stella.

The girl laughed. "Why do you speak to me in English?"

"Because," he said, "you are to me so very English, if you please."

Stella said to herself, "And you are to me so very Eastern, so strangely Eastern, if you please."

Though dressed in European clothes as "up to date" as could be bought, he was like one of the portraits of Seti I. on the white walls of his temple at Abydos.

"Well," she said, "if I find I can speak Arabic better than you can speak English, I shall be generous, and let you practise your English when you speak to me."

"Thank you very much," he said deferentially, "but I would like to speak in my own language, if you please."

"Why?" Stella said.

"Because it is more beautiful for expressing my feelings."

"You are right," she said. "Even I feel the want in English of the hundred inflections we have in Arabic for one word. In Arabic you can express any degree of feeling you wish by the different use of the one word; in English, we have to qualify it with adjectives."

"That is why," he said, "I think you have no poetry, in English . . . no poetry, at least, that *I* have read:" he added the last words apologetically.

Nicolas chimed in. "It's the same thing in music. I used to think the ancient Arab music was grotesque. I remember the first time I heard a famous Arab tenor. I had just returned from Paris. I couldn't hide my

laughter . . . now I know that it was my own ignorance ; he's wonderful ! "

" Oh ! " Stella said impulsively, " I do want to hear some *good* Arab singer. I want to go to the Arab theatre. May I ? "

" Certainly you will go "—it was Girgis who spoke—" if you please."

" And I want to have an Arab dinner."

" Certainly you must have it, if you please."

As they spoke it gave Stella pleasure to watch his flashing eyes, like black agate, his dazzling teeth, the fine contour of his pillar-like throat. Yet with all his Eastern glow of colour, she felt the strange immobility of his countenance, characteristic of his Oriental blood.

Watching him, she was saying to herself, " He is my full cousin, my father's sister's child, yet I feel that he should have a label stuck on him, and be standing on a pedestal in the Cairo Museum." Girgis was nevertheless very much a living piece of youthful manhood, a manhood of mysterious passions and powers. Vernon, her lover, belonged to the race of people who despised Orientals like Girgis.

At dinner Girgis sat next to her, but he spoke very little. Towards the end of the meal, however, she was surprised by the unexpected intuition he showed ; for he suddenly came out of his stone-like reserve to say : " I prefer to remain silent than to distress you."

" But why should you distress me ? "

" By talking to you of less interesting things than your thoughts afford you."

" You are too modest : all that you have told me is very interesting. I wish you would tell me more about your work."

" It is not so interesting as your thoughts. I see that your mind is saying very much, your eyes speak . . . everything yet is strange to you."

" Yes, everything is very strange."

" I am one of the many strange things." Only his eyes smiled : his skin, which was tanned to an indescribable hue by desert suns, became a little warmer. " But do not forget, if you please, that you are also strange."

" To you ? "

" To me. When I look at you I have to say to myself : She is my cousin, Hadassah Lekejian."

" I am called Stella in England."

" Stella ! " he said—" It is pretty. What is Stella, if you please ? "

" Stella means a star ; Esther means the planet Venus ; I think."

"That is beautiful," he said; he looked at her as much as to say, "Everything about you is beautiful." "In the East we study the stars . . . they guide us."

"Have you ever heard of Swift?" Stella asked.

"Swift? No." He looked puzzled. "Swift means very fast, does it not?"

"Swift was the name of a great English writer who loved a girl called Esther Vanhomrigh; he called her Stella."

"The man who will marry you will call you Stella?"

"He does."

The strong face betrayed no sign of surprise, yet the girl's words were wholly unexpected. Girgis Boutros had not heard of his cousin's engagement: he was over head and ears in love with her at first sight, and prepared to ask his uncle's permission to marry her as soon as dinner was over.

"You are affianced?"

"Yes—engaged, as we call it."

"And you will be married soon?"

"No, not yet; not for a year, perhaps more."

"But how can he wait? He has seen you?" (The strict Copts do not see their affianced brides.)

Stella smiled. "Yes, he has seen me; in England we do not marry men whom we have never seen—engagements often last more than a year. Englishmen are taught patience: they can wait."

"He is English?" He pronounced it *Een*glesh. There was surprise in his voice, surprise expressive of annoyance.

"Yes, he is an English soldier."

"And he loves you?"

The girl laughed. "I hope so; why do you ask?"

"The English are strange."

"I don't find them so," she said. "Couldn't you wait *one* year for some one whom you loved very much?"

"Could I wait?" he said quietly. "Yes, I could wait seven years, like Jacob, but I would follow her, I would follow my star." His eyes flashed with quickly kindled passion, but his features remained immobile.

"Englishmen trust their women, they need not follow them; we prefer to know each other intimately before we marry."

"They are not very wise," he said. "I see much unhappiness in the papers. I read the divorces. The English are *brave*, but not *wise*; they learnt much civilisation from the East, but not wisdom; they have never learnt wisdom or philosophy!"

Stella laughed. While they spoke she watched his

manners at table . . . they were perfect, and his hands were so beautiful that it gave her pleasure to let him prepare her fruit for her. "Why do you read the English divorces?" she asked.

"I wish to practise my English, and they interest me very much."

"And the divorces, are they more interesting than novels?"

"Novels? If you please, what are they?"

"Romances, love stories I mean."

He laughed outright for the first time; it was not the frank laugh of an Englishman, but the cynical amusement of a philosopher. "Love *stories!*" They are only fairy tales written for children or for nuns; the English do not believe in them themselves; they are not for men. When I wish to learn something about home life in England I read the divorces."

"Divorces break up home life, they do not make it," Stella said laughingly.

"It seems strange to you . . . who have been brought up in England. . . . Out here we know what the English are; we hear from the divorce courts what they are in their own country."

Stella's back went up . . . "Yes," she said, "you ought to know what they are, considering what they have done for us."

"What have they done for us, if you please?"

"What have they not done for all Egypt, Christian and Moslem?"

"I do not wish to offend, if you please . . . for you are affianced to an Englishman. I do not discuss the politics with women."

He was a stone image once more.

"You have not offended," Stella said, "but I hate ingratitude, and in England women discuss politics . . . they will soon become active politicians."

"But *we* will not discuss it, if you please; you have only been a short time in this country." He spoke with the air of a man who expected to be obeyed.

"It would not matter how long I lived here," she said—her temper was rising—"it could not alter facts. The English have given us everything. Have all the Christians as well as the Moslem fellahin forgotten the abuses they suffered, the injustices they endured, the unspeakable wrongs that were thrust upon them?"

She looked at him for an answer.

He raised his eyes slowly; his thick lashes brushed his cheeks in a way Stella had never seen eye-lashes do before;

in his glance there was burning scorn and hate. "They gave to us every good thing," he said, "but the best thing of all, that they will never give."

"What have they not given us?"

"Love," he said. "They have not given us love."

Stella was silent.

He was still burning her with his eyes. "I once went to the English church," he said. "The priest spoke all of 'love.' He said, 'God is love . . .' he said, 'Love ye one another. . . .' Out of church I have not seen that love from any English: if they had any for us they would understand us."

"You think if the English loved us they would understand us?"

"Yes," he said; "but the English *do not* try."

"Hadassah!"

It was Stella's father who spoke. "You must not linger if you wish to be in the house when the curtain goes up."

"I don't want to miss a moment of it," she said, as she rose from her chair. With a smile to her cousin, she left the room with her mother. Girgis Boutros suddenly felt that the door had closed between light and darkness.

CHAPTER VI

THE opera-house was full when Hadassah Lekejian entered it with her mother and cousin. Her father and brother were already in their box.

As she took her place many heads were turned to look at her, for the overture was almost finished, and from the stalls the English officers and men had inspected, with their glasses, the occupants of the various boxes: they were glad of a fresh arrival.

The residents they knew by sight, and many of the visitors, for they had attended some, if not all, of the various hotel dances which had just commenced in Cairo.

A man, himself a visitor, asked his companion, an engineer on the State railways, who the beautiful girl was.

The engineer looked at her through his glasses. "Don't know," he said; "yes I do, though—wait a minute—that's young Boutros; he's a Copt, a cotton magnate, and that's his uncle, Nicolas Lekejian, and his wife; she's an Irish woman. They're among the best Syrians in Cairo; the old chap's an awfully decent sort . . . and that girl must be his daughter; I heard she had come home."

The stranger was silent; then he asked, after looking at Stella again: "Do you know them?"

"Yes, slightly . . . in business only."

"You don't know the family?"

"No, I once met the son, an awfully cultivated chap."

"Won't that girl know any one in Cairo?"

"If by that you mean the English or best French . . . no."

The stranger was silent, but his glasses did not leave the girl's face . . . he knew that she could not see him. After watching her expression very carefully he turned his glasses upon the occupants of the other boxes and then inspected the stalls. There were certainly one or two very pretty girls in the house, but there was not another woman with Hadassah Lekejian's elegance or distinction. Never had he seen such clear eyes or such a transparent skin. She had taken her place by her mother, her cousin was seated on the other side of her, Nicolas and his father were standing behind them. He noticed that during the performance the occupants of Stella's box had ears and eyes for nothing but the opera itself. Even the cotton magnate, who looked a hundred times more Eastern than his cousin, never took his eyes off the artistes. But in the interval (he was watching the girl very closely) he could see her rapid survey of the house, he could almost feel the sense of aloofness she felt from her fellow women. He leaned forward, and for a moment their eyes met! . . . All her life Hadassah was to remember that look.

Girgis Boutros was enjoying himself amazingly. He had never before been in such near contact or talked so freely to a young girl. He was an only son and all his relations on his father's side were old-fashioned Copts, who kept their women-kind as carefully secluded and as veiled as Moslems. He had therefore only spoken to his mother and his aunt. To sit by Hadassah's side, to be the recipient of her smiles and intelligent conversation, was almost more than his easily excited nature could stand. To Hadassah he looked like a statue carved in granite, with the glass eyes which the early sculptors gave to their heads . . . to himself he felt like a thing of flaming fire. He longed to burst into poetry, to recite to her verses from Persian songs which expressed his admiration of her looks.

In a box opposite to their own there was his mother, a beautiful woman, of a very classic type, dressed in an expensive Parisian model gown. She was Hadassah's father's sister, but she had not Nicolas Lekejian's intelligent and very noble cast of features. Her face, for all its classic contour, was touched with the indolence and sensuality

of the East. During the second interval Stella noticed that her aunt's box became full of visitors from all parts of the house, Greeks, Italians, and Syrians.

"*Levantines*," the engineer in the stalls styled them all. It was then that he pointed out to his companion the impossibility of knowing people like the Lekejian's intimately. "You let yourself in for knowing 'Levantines' like these," he said, "and they're impossible."

His words expressed Hadassah's feelings. Girgis, amused and interested her with his un-English ways of looking at things, and his very English way of wearing his clothes . . . but her aunt's friends *were* impossible. Were they the people she ought to know? Were they the only people who would accept her in this cruel land? Their elaborate dresses of gorgeous brocades, their crude jewellery, their too ample figures, and, worst of all, the expression of their eyes and mouths, disgusted her. Stella thought of her own mouth: she would rather it went hard and sour with the bitterness of the cup that was now almost always between her lips than that it should become loose and coarse like those of the over-dressed, over-fed women in her aunt's box. Her aunt looked a refined lady beside them—still, they were her friends. Then Stella asked herself, if her aunt had refused to have these people for her friends whom else would she have had . . . what friends had her mother?

Not one soul in this crowded house, in this opera-house, where she had rented a box ever since she had come as a bride to Cairo with Nicolas Lekejian, knew her well enough to pay her a friendly visit between the acts. She had not one drop of Eastern blood in her veins, and she looked beautiful and youthful in her white lace gown and brilliantly hued Persian scarf—but she was an outcast!

Hadassah could have screamed with shame, and yet she realised the distance by which her father's people were removed from the people of the Western world.

Girgis Boutros said, "Do you know my mother?"

"No," Stella said. "When I was a little girl I may have met her, but I don't remember her."

"Will you allow me to introduce you to her, if you please?"

Stella hesitated and looked at her own mother. Girgis thought she meant to imply that she could not go alone with him to his mother's box. "I will ask your mother; she will come too, if you please."

"No, don't ask her," Stella said: "I will meet your mother another time . . . not to-night, I like talking to you best."

He noted the anxiety in her voice, but he did not betray his understanding of it. "If you please," he said; but my mother would be very happy to see her brother's child and introduce you to her friends."

Stella could not gather from his way of speaking whether he meant to annoy her or to be polite to her, and he did not mean that she should! He knew exactly what was passing in his beautiful cousin's mind about his mother's friends. He himself had no love for them, indeed he knew very few of them. In his opinion they were stupid and vulgar, but he resented what he termed Hadassah's English attitude towards all things which were not British.

Stella did her utmost to be cheerful between the acts, and succeeded so well that even Nicolas thought she was enjoying herself. He knew that his cousin was *much* more Oriental in his opinion of women than he or his father were, and he had been just a little anxious to know how he would conduct himself for the long hours he would spend in Stella's company.

But his mind had soon been set completely at rest by Girgis's attitude of respectful admiration.

In the middle of the longest interval the Khedive and his suite entered the house. The house rose to its feet to greet him, and remained standing until he was seated. The orchestra played the Khedivial anthem. Only one figure in the house remained seated; he was the leader of the advanced Nationalist party. So public an act of disrespect and disloyalty could not be allowed to pass unnoticed, and later on Stella heard that the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who was in the house, had sent for him and upbraided him for his behaviour, and that the Nationalist leader had insolently replied that no law obliged him to rise if he wished to remain seated, and had refused to apologise.

The minister had thereupon ordered him to leave the house, which he did.

Hadassah's father was furious. Girgis was wholly indifferent. . . . Stella was completely puzzled.

But why should he insult the Khedive?" Stella said "He's not English!"

"The Khedive recognises English rule in Egypt and uses his influence to help that rule. He is contented to be a puppet in their hands."

"I see," she said. "Egypt for the Egyptians extends even to the Khedive." She was wondering if the Syrians and all other Christians would be ousted from the land *with* the English when the time came, or if the Copts would still be wanted to do the brain-work and the art-work and the dirty work of the country, as she had discove red

they had always done ever since the days when the Arabs invaded the land and brought into it the teachings of the Prophet. For the Arabs brought nothing with them but their war-like qualities and their art-destroying religion.

She turned to her cousin, whose face told her nothing of what he was thinking. "I know more about Home Rule for Ireland," she said, "than Home Rule for Egypt. I feel I'm not qualified to speak, but the Egyptians do seem to me even less capable of managing their own affairs than the Irish. Why can't they be contented with the peace and prosperity the English have given them?"

Girgis thought for a moment. "You are affianced to an English soldier, if you please."

"Yes," Stella said, "what has that to do with it?"

"Will you ask him this question: If the German nation invaded England and conquered it, and made it many times more prosperous than it is now, if they improved the lives of the working classes, if they taught England all the wonderful things that are done in Germany for education and for the industrial life of the people, would England be so grateful to them that she would like to keep them there for ever, would she delight to sing their national anthems? Would England honour one of her own people if he were contented to be a nominal king under German rule?"

Stella did not answer. Fortunately for her, the curtain went up for the last act.

Shortly after this unpleasant incident the British Agent's wife entered her box—it was almost opposite the Lekejians. A number of people came with her, officers in full-dress uniforms and civilians wearing ribbons and orders. Evidently there had been a dinner-party at the British Agent's house. After they had taken their seats Stella suddenly recognised one of the party as a man she had danced with many times at balls in Norfolk. She bowed to him and received in return a bow and a warm smile. He seemed delighted to see her and showed very plainly that he meant to come and speak to her. Presently she saw him whisper to a lady next to him, one of the most stiff-necked of the English residents; the lady turned her eyes to Stella's box while she spoke. Stella knew she was discussing her. From that moment the man never looked at her again during the performance.

But that was not the finish of the evening's entertainment, nor the end of Stella's mortification; for Girgis Boutros, knowing that she wished to eat an Arab meal in an Arab restaurant, begged his aunt to allow him to leave

the opera before the performance was finished and go to the high-class Arab restaurant which he often frequented, and order a special supper, one which Stella would enjoy.

Stella was delighted at the idea, so her mother agreed. Where there were no English to wound her pride Stella felt that she might enjoy a purely native evening in characteristic surroundings.

So Girgis went on ahead, and if Stella could have heard the orders he gave to the cook and the owner of the place, she certainly would have enjoyed herself; they sounded like some passage out of the Koran, so deferentially were they received, and so solemnly.

When the party arrived the servants salaamed to the ground. They scarcely dared raise their eyes, yet they wondered how any one so beautiful could be so impure and so bold as to uncover her face in public; how any one with the eyes of a gazelle could be so familiar with men, other than her father and brother, as to dine with them.

Girgis had chosen the best and most secluded table in the room. He was very nervous, in case Stella would not think the supper nice enough, but it was all that money could procure on so short a notice.

As there were no other guests in the room they had the entire attention of the waiters. They sat at long tables spread with white cloths, but they had no knives and forks or plates. Everything had to be eaten with their fingers, a process which Stella soon discovered was not nearly so disagreeable as she imagined, for the meat, of whatsoever kind it might be, was cut up into small pieces, and piled lightly on the top of water-cress or parsley. The large dish containing it was placed in the centre of the table. Each person was given a round scone of bread (like a Scotch harvester's bap), which was hollow when the top if it was torn off. These scones serve as pockets for the poor, who purchase their edibles ready cooked in the street. At table they act as plates and knives and forks.

It was Girgis who showed Stella how to help herself to a piece of deliciously savoury grilled meat, from the centre dish, with the assistance of a piece of bread. She had to be careful only to use the third finger and the thumb. When she had successfully carried the morsel from the centre of the table to her own scone she had to dip it in one of the four small dishes of appetising sauces, placed in front of her. It was great fun, and the food was so delicious that Stella ate heartily and forgot her troubles.

Very soon the room filled up.

Arabs came in and greeted one another in the stately Arab way—and the Copts as well as the Moslems washed

at the fountain in the court which led off the dining-hall, before sitting down to their meals. It was a pretty sight, the beautiful dresses of the natives lending colour to the scene. There was a great deal of etiquette observed even amongst quite young men who had evidently come to enjoy themselves. Stella had been so engrossed with the arrival of a new course that she had not noticed a party of Europeans enter the building. A tall screen hid the table at which they had quietly seated themselves. It was the next one to their own, and near the door.

Presently her ear caught English voices; some one was answering a question.

"Yes, when you get pure Arabs *they're* all right; the unspoilt desert Arabs are hard to beat for honour as well as for bravery."

"Are there many left?"

"Not in Cairo itself . . . the Gyppie is a very different creature, but even the Gyppie, when he's a *Moslem*, isn't so bad; it's the Christian-Copts and Christian other things one can't stand."

"What is a Copt!" a girl's voice asked.

"The Gyppie that thinks himself a Christian."

"I didn't know there were any," the girl said. "I thought Egyptians were always Mohammedans."

There was laughter.

"Did you never hear of the Arab invasion? What did you think they were before the year six hundred, before the Arabs came?"

"Pagans," the girl said lightly, "weren't they?"

A third voice said, "They're Pagans still pretty well, aren't they?"

"The Copts are a mixture of Pagan, Moslem, and degraded early Christian; for instance, they stick to the old Pagan idea that Thoth weighs the soul at death, the same thing we saw so often on the temples up the Nile, only they have substituted the archangel Michael for Thoth, and their funerals are far more Pagan than the Moslems'. They are a queer people."

Stella lost the next few sentences.

"It's the beastly Levantines one can't bear in this country."

"What *are* Levantines?" the girl asked.

"Speaking broadly, we English class the Greeks, Syrians, Maltese, and Jews all under the heading of Levantines."

A voice which had not spoken before said, "In fact, anything that is not purely British. . . . Do the French come into that scathing category?"

There was so much sarcasm in the voice that Stella

could not refrain from moving her chair just a little, so as to see the speaker. As she did so, her eyes for the second time that evening met the eyes of the stranger who had asked who she was in the opera-house.

Her face paled with indignation and shame. She could not conceal her feelings—tears filled her eyes; but the next moment she was listening to her cousin Girgis's description of a desert dancer he had seen about a week ago at the marriage of a wealthy Copt in the Fayyum.

Her composure returned; gradually her heart began to beat again at its ordinary pace; she was able to understand what her cousin was talking about, though all the while in her ears there rang the words: "It's these beastly Levantines that one can't bear in this country." She was, then, a Levantine; Vernon would have to learn that from such people as she had been listening to.

"You are thinking again," her cousin said: "your name suits you; I feel that only half of you is here . . . your thoughts are in the stars very much!"

"Oh, no!" Stella said. "I am very interested. Can *I* see this lovely dancer? How wonderful she must be!"

"It is not possible," he said.

"But why not?"

"Sometimes she might come to dance in a very wealthy man's harem . . . but not for strangers."

"*We* are not strangers; we live here?"

"*You* do not live like the natives. They are proud, these dancers; they will not dance to Western peoples."

"But why?"

He raised his eyes in the ancient way. "They can get all the money and jewels and adulation they want from people who can understand their art . . . why should they dance to please the ignorant and curious?"

"Do they get much money?"

"I have seen one dancer take away with her £200 in money and many valuable jewels in one evening."

"Could I never see her?"

"I think not . . . if you please."

"But why not? You say she dances for Christian Copts?"

"Your mother does not visit with any Copts who live like Moslems . . . she only knows a very few of the Catholic Christians, the Advanced Copts."

"It is all very confusing. In England I told people that the Christians in Egypt were like the Christians in England . . . I had only known Advanced Catholic Copts, I suppose. Do *your* Copt cousins veil themselves and live apart from their men-kind like Moslems?"

"Most of them," he said, "and if I marry one I shall never see her until half the marriage ceremony is gone through; they are very old-fashioned, these cousins."

"And you will marry one?" Stella's voice was full of amazement.

"I do not wish to *now*, if you please."

Stella laughed, his meaning was so transparent.

"*You* can laugh," he said, "because *you* are going to marry the man you love."

The laugh died out of Stella's eyes, for her mind was quickly stormed with all that his words suggested! She was going to marry the man she loved . . . what would that man have said if he had been here to-night? . . . if he had seen her at the opera scorned by his own nation, if he had heard her classed with Levantines!

To Girgis her eyes were in the stars again, so he lapsed into silence. While they were served to many courses, a street musician had been playing on his long Egyptian flute plaintive notes very Oriental and extremely monotonous.

To do justice to the foreigners who had been discussing the Levantines so unflatteringly, it is only fair to admit that none of Stella's party had been seen by them until they rose to go; it was only when Stella pushed out her chair, beyond their sheltering screen, that she had been seen. After that nothing more had been said. Fortunately, too, no one but Stella and her mother had heard the remarks, for Girgis Boutros could not catch an English conversation, unless it was addressed directly to him, with intentional distinctness of pronunciation. He could not interpret half-tones. So it was only Stella who noticed the look of consternation and shame on the face of the engineer, who had evidently brought his two guests to supper in the Arab restaurant by way of entertaining them. He had been completely hidden behind the screen, and Stella knew that he imagined the restaurant held nothing but natives. His own party and Stella's were the only people in European dress in the room. Stella was generous enough to be sorry for him, yet the words he had said could never be unsaid; she could never again feel herself anything but a Levantine in the eyes of an Englishman in Cairo.

CHAPTER VII

VERNON was in Egypt! He had been gazetted to Cairo for December 18th, but had obtained a fortnight's leave because he wished to spend the time with Stella and her people up the Nile before he commenced his duties. The Lekejians' dahabeah was anchored off Luxor. Stella was impatiently waiting for the arrival of the Government mail-boat which was to bring her lover; her mother, who was sitting on the deck drawing-room beside her, saw her agitation. When Stella was agitated or deeply moved, the slate-grey of her eyes deepened to black and her lips trembled. She had never once mentioned to her mother the wounds her pride had received, or said a word to show her natural nervousness about Vernon's arrival, but she had gladly agreed to her parents' tactful suggestion that they should spend the time with Vernon in their charmingly appointed dehabeah on the Nile. Neither mother nor daughter had ever hinted that it would be pleasanter to receive him out of Cairo; it was silently understood.

Dressed in spotless white, Stella looked enchanting. Her horror of Levantine splendour had cut her dressing down to the severest simplicity, which suited her youthful freshness. The only jewel she ever wore now was *el shabka*, as Girgis called her engagement ring.

At last she saw Nicolas, who had gone to meet the mail-steamer, with Vernon by his side. Her whole being trembled with emotion, for her lover looked a splendid figure of English manhood. When he saw her standing under the deck awning of their house-boat he took off his hat and waved it triumphantly in the air; his hair shone in the sunlight like bright gold—how fair and British he looked! In a very few moments he was on the deck beside her; he had scarcely permitted the smart Sudanese boy, in a white jersey and green tarbush, to brush the sand off his feet and trousers with an ostrich-feather broom . . . he was so impatient to reach Stella. With the lightness of perfect physical training he vaulted or sprang over everything in his way.

His greeting was to her mother first, who extinguished herself the next moment behind a tall palm, while Vernon folded Stella in his arms and kissed her.

"Oh! do let me look at you," Stella said, when breath permitted her to speak; "I can hardly believe it's true that you are here in the flesh beside me."

"I'll prove it," he said delightedly, "though I can

hardly believe it myself!" He put his arms round her again and kissed her smiling mouth.

"It is harder for me to believe it, dearest," she said tenderly.

"Why should it be?" he said. "I kept thinking the train would break down or the ship go to the bottom, or something else awful would happen to keep me away from you. The journey seemed unending; the nearer I got to Luxor the longer the hours became."

Stella gave a contented sigh . . . but there was something in the sigh which expressed more than content, it expressed a depth of emotion which the girl had never shown in the old days.

He looked at her anxiously, she felt his desire to understand. "So many things have happened to change my life," she said, "and my *beliefs*. I was afraid you, too, might have changed?"

"Have you changed about me?" he asked quizzically; "but tell me what has so changed your life. Of course everything out here is awfully different, but what's that got to do with you and me?"

"Just everything," she said; "but for this week at least you are still my own." She clung to him as he raised her face to his.

"I'm yours for ever," he said; "don't talk rot, Stella, not even in fun—it's not kind."

She laughed. "Then I won't, dearest—and here come father and mother; they've been giving us a few moments to get over our 'shyness.'"

They laughed and ran hand-in-hand to Mr. and Mrs. Lekejian.

"Father, this is Vernon," Stella cried. "He's awfully shy about meeting you, but I've told him you aren't a very frightening sort of a person, are you, darling?" She kissed her father from the overflowing happiness in her heart.

Vernon held out his hand; he liked the general appearance of his prospective father-in-law, although it instantly brought the fact to his memory that Stella, on her father's side, was not English. "I am shy, sir, truly enough as Stella says, for I can't see any earthly reason *why* you should approve of me as a son-in-law. Stella could have married any one in the world, and I am only a soldier with nothing worth mentioning to offer her but my devotion."

"That, coupled with an Englishman's sense of honour and the duty he owes his wife, is enough for me," Mr. Lekejian said, "that is, of course, if my girl wants you." He looked laughingly at his daughter. "I have sufficient worldly goods to endow her comfortably for life; but

remember," he said more gravely, "that in giving her to you I am trusting you with my most priceless possession." He let the young man's hand drop reluctantly.

Vernon could not answer, for he felt suddenly confronted with the real facts of the case, that he, a total stranger to this man, was going to take from him his most priceless possession, that he was accepting the responsibility of bestowing upon Stella a love and devotion which was to equal the devotion of her parents; . . . but as he could not express his deep appreciation of the honour Nicolas Lekejian was paying him, he merely said, "I will try not to forget, sir, indeed I will."

Mrs. Lekejian, who was very fond of Vernon said, with just a trace of her Irish brogue, which still showed itself in moments of deep feeling: "Indeed, I'm sure you will, Vernon: Stella, I'm not afraid to trust you to Vernon's care."

The smile Stella gave her mother was all love and gratitude.

"I'm glad you came straight to Luxor without staying, in Cairo, for this is *Egypt*," Nicolas the younger said. With his walking-stick he indicated the wonderful view of the soft Theban hills bathed in the pink sunlight of Upper Egypt, and the plain where the far-spreading waters of the inundation of the Nile reflected the exquisite blue of the sky. "Thebes lies there," he said, "the world's first great capital, the city of the Pharaohs who oppressed the children of Israel. We can go there to-morrow if you like —it's a lovely ride; to-night I thought we might walk to Karnak. The moon is almost full, and Karnak looks glorious by moonlight. Would you care to?"

"Of course I'd like to go," Vernon said, "but I'm awfully ignorant about Egypt. Please take it for granted that I know absolutely nothing . . . what is Karnak?"

"Why should you know?" Stella said, sympathetically. "Karnak was the 'mother-temple,' of all the city temples of Thebes; of all the temples in Egypt it is the grandest, though it's not the most perfect. You'll love it. Nicolas and I went there last night. You'll reverence mere men more after you have seen Karnak."

"I suppose I should have read up Egyptian history before I came out," Vernon said, "but, to tell you the truth, I didn't think much about Egypt; it was you I was coming to see."

Their eyes answered each other understandingly, and Stella said laughingly: "You're just taking Egypt thrown in with your pound of tea."

"I suppose I am, but anyhow, I never saw anything

quite so amazing as that." He pointed to the perfect reflection in the water of the temple of Luxor, which stands so close to the river's bank that you can see it as clearly in the water as you can on the land.

Its long row of lotus columns, tinted with the same delicate pink as the Theban hills, seemed to rise from the depths of the river like the buds of lilies striving to reach the sun.

"Isn't it exquisite?" Stella said. "That's a part of the great temple at Karnak; it was joined to it in ancient times by a paved avenue, lined on either side with crouching rams—half a mile in length. When we've had some tea and it's a little cooler, we'll go into Luxor temple if you like; you ought to just see it before we visit Karnak, whose greater glory overshadows it."

"I'd love to," Vernon said, "though I'm a very poor sight-seer."

"You needn't take it very seriously," Nicolas said. "In the days when Thebes was the capital of Egypt, Karnak and Luxor were parts of the city—the Nile ran right through it. The modern Arabic name for the eastern portion of the city is El Aksar; Luxor is merely a corruption of it."

"I see," Vernon said; "it is hard to imagine that all this was once a city." He pointed towards the irrigated land, green with the first shoots of the coming crops, and the stretches of beautiful water which lay between the river's bank and the desert beyond, where the monuments which tell you of the past glory of Thebes are still standing.

Nicolas soon left the lovers to themselves and, for at least one hour and a half, they talked of things which had little to do with the splendour of Thebes or the wonders of ancient Egypt. They were young, and they were in love, so the hour and a half seemed all too short for the pleasure they had to crowd into it.

It was so comforting to feel he had not changed in one iota, that Stella only laughed when he answered her questions in little more than monosyllables. And if for the first time it dawned upon her that the subjects which interested him were limited, and that even in that first hour many things had sprung to her lips to say which she held back in case they would bore him, she was not in the humour to be conscious of it. The joy she felt in realising that in his eyes at least—and he was typically English—she was perfect, made her blind to everything else.

At half-past four Stella saw Benhadad, their grave butler, carrying the silver tea-tray laden with the tea-pot, coffee-pot, and cups and saucers. He wore a scarlet

tarbush and a beautiful soft grey silk galabeah; behind him walked another servant similarly dressed, bearing a tray with hot cakes, sandwiches, and biscuits. When the tea was arranged, with great solemnity the tall Copt with the features of an ancient Egyptian came up to Stella and said in perfect English, "Tea is served, *sitt.*"

Stella asked him something in Arabic.

To which he answered: "*Aiwah sitt,*" and pointed to the delicately cut plate of jam sandwiches, and when Stella said something else to him in Arabic he again said with exquisite deference: "*Aiwah sitt,*" and clapped his hands. One of the small bare-footed Sudanese boys came running to him. Vernon was charmed with the lad's bright face and with the beauty of his slim, well-polished limbs. When Stella spoke to him he repeated, as his superior had done, "*Aiwah sitt, aiwah sitt,*" and bowed his slim body almost double.

The next second he had bounded off with the grace of an antelope to the bows of the boat. The sound of flute-music soon began, and the clear tink-tink-tinking of a "bottle-and-key."

Vernon looked to Stella for an explanation.

"That's our private orchestra," she said laughingly. "I thought you would like the 'real thing' for your first afternoon. That's typical Nile music. The flute-player is quite a musician, the other instrument is nothing more than a glass bottle and key; it's very effective when the earthen drum comes in—you'll hear its deeper tum-tum-tumming soon."

"This is perfect," Vernon whispered; "Heaven couldn't be better."

Stella shivered and took a white woollen shawl from Yehla, her boy, who had silently appeared with it."

Vernon folded it closely round her. "How did he know that you wanted it?" he asked. "Did you make a sign to him? I heard nothing."

Stella smiled. "No, I never did anything but feel the need of it . . . you'll soon find out that you have only to 'think a thing' in Egypt to have some servant hand it to you—just before sun-down it always gets chilly, a wind springs up."

"How quickly things happen!" he said; "it was awfully warm and bright about five minutes ago—it's getting a bit chilly certainly."

"The air will get warmer after the sun actually drops behind the line. All sorts of strange things happen at this hour in Egypt, especially on the Nile: objects on land look perfectly black during the actual glow of the

sunset, and then everything for a time becomes drowned in an orange light. Then the sun drops and a new mystery begins; a fire springs up, as if it came from the underworld, and sends up awful arms of flames into the darkening heavens: you'll never forget your first Egyptian sunset."

As she spoke the sonorous voice of the *mueddin* belonging to the mosque whose white minaret rises up so strangely from the splendid courtyard, which Rameses II. built to his pagan deity in the temple of Luxor, called the faithful to prayer.

It was the *maghrib* or sunset prayer which, according to the Prophet's teaching, should be said a few moments after sunset, or a few moments before, for he would not allow his followers to commence their prayers exactly at sunrise or sunset, or sun down, because infidels *worshipped* the sun at such hours.

Vernon listened to the ancient cry wonderingly; it was like a voice from another world; there was a mystery in its beauty which was full of godliness.

The next moment he saw the white-turbaned heads of the Mohammedans on the banks of the river bowing to the earth, and many of the simple fellahin prostrating themselves on the ground until their foreheads touched the sand—not one grain of which would they brush off if it clung to their skin.

Vernon noticed that Benhadad and the other servants on their house-boat did not take any notice of the call to prayer, but continued doing the work they were engaged in. "Why don't your servants pray?" he asked. He was wondering if Mr. Lekejian had forbidden them to do so.

"Because they are Christians," she said.

"Do you only employ Christian servants?"

"Yes, my father insists—except the Sudanese 'crew,' of course."

"I thought Mohammedans were always considered more honest. Why does he have Christians?"

"Because we ourselves are Christians," Stella said, ignoring the first part of his remark.

"Well, naturally," he laughed. "Have the missionaries converted these Johnnies?"

Stella laughed this time. "Their forefathers were converted in about the first century," she said. "Christian missionaries haven't been very successful since that time."

Vernon whistled. "You don't mean it?"

"Almost all the Copts are Christians," she said, "and they pray seven times a day if they're strict, but not in public."

"The *what* did you call them ? "

"Copts," Stella repeated laughingly. "Copt is the European term : it is derived from an Arabic word for the Egyptian Christian—the Egyptians who did not embrace Mohammedanism are all Copts. It's the term now applied to all native Christians in Egypt, although originally the word Copt only meant Egyptian—but don't look as if I was speaking of the sacred bulls of Apis."

"I don't know what sort of bulls the Apis bulls are," he said simply. "Look here, I do feel an awful duffer."

"Copts are as nearly as possible the real descendants of the ancient Egyptians, the Egyptians who remained unaffected by the Arab invasion, and Mohammedan religion. There are a few *Moslem*-Copts, I think, but not many—native Christians converted in later days to Mohammedanism, but they are mostly in Upper Egypt in very out-lying villages. When the Egyptians, generally speaking, became Mohammedans they intermarried with the Arab invaders and with other Mohammedan races. The Christians only remained pure, except of course for the intermarrying which went on in the early Christian days before the Arab invasion by Amr in 640, and so they were called Copts to distinguish them as being the original Egyptians. Above all other people they represent the race of the ancient Egyptians to-day."

"How awfully interesting ! " he said. "Are they in any way pure in the other senses of the word ?—are they a decent set of people, better than the ordinary 'missionary-made' Christians ? "

"That depends on how you look upon the matter," she said . . . "*you* will think them dreadful." Her tone had suddenly become bitter.

"Why do you say that . . . ? " it was the first time he had ever heard anything but sweetness from her lips.

"Because you are English," she said, "and the English think it is the correct thing to despise their fellow-Christians in Egypt."

"But *are* they fellow-Christians ? " he said. "Are you sure they aren't just degraded Mohammedans who have sold their faith for the flesh-pots of the Christians ? "

"They are Christians of a strange sort," she said, "Christians who have suffered centuries of wrongs and humiliations and tortures for their beliefs ; they have endured such persecutions and injustices that only the letter of their religion is left, not the spirit. They aren't Christians as you and I accept the meaning of the word, but they are Christians insomuch that they have never lost hold of the teachings of the early *Church* of Christ. None of them,

poor things, know anything about the beauty and humanity of His doctrines, not even as much as the Mohammedans do."

"How strange," he said, "to have hung on to the 'Church' for all these centuries and to have lost Christ! What a tenacious people!"

"Of course there are some Copts who love Christ and love humanity through Him—they do crop up now and again—and there *are* a few saintly names even in *modern* Coptic history, but not many. I'm speaking now of the people; not of the highly educated upper-class Copts."

"What a lot I have to learn, darling! I don't know where to begin."

"Oh, you needn't bother about the *Copts*," Stella said hastily—again bitterness was in her voice—"no Englishman ever does learn the real truth about them or tries to find out any good in them. To the tourist the Copt isn't such an effective asset in the landscape as the Mussulman, who prays devoutly in the desert, or in the crowded street, or in the noisy railway station in the most picturesque fashion; the Copts have far *longer* prayers to say five times each day, but strangers don't hear them."

"I believe you're awfully keen about these Copts," he said.

"I'm sorry to say I'm rather the reverse; but since I've been in Cairo father has told me lots of things which account for their unpleasant characteristics. I've read their history, and I've come to the conclusion that if they had given up their faith and turned Mohammedans . . ." she sighed, "in fact, if all Christians in the East *were* Mohammedans, it would be better for them; the English, in spite of being Christians themselves, would respect them more if they were."

"That sounds as though Mohammedanism was the better religion of the two, at least for Orientals."

"But don't you think the English ought to admire the Copts for sticking to their beliefs, even though they have lost the real beauty of Christ's teachings? It's hardly their own fault that they've become what they are. A despised people becomes servile!"

"I suppose the English *do* admire them?"

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Because they treat them as outcasts" . . . her indignation was rising. . . . "But, dearest," she said, "don't let me talk about it so soon, let me forget that there ever were such things as Jacobite-Copts and Uniat-Copts and Levantines."

"Whatever is a Uniat-Copt?" he asked. "I never heard of such a lot of strange peoples?"

"A Catholic Copt . . . which means a Roman Catholic belonging to the Egyptian Christian Church. There aren't very many of them, and they have only existed for about a hundred and fifty years. My father is a Uniat-Copt, although he is a Syrian."

Vernon looked at her in astonishment. "*Your* father?" he said slowly: "Is he a Copt?"

"Not in the original meaning of the word because he is a Syrian, but for many generations his people have lived in Egypt. Speaking broadly, a Copt means a native Christian, and my father is not a native, although he goes to the Coptic Uniat church."

"I see," Vernon said slowly; "I hadn't realised that."

"I knew you hadn't." Stella spoke nervously.

He took her hand in his and pressed it to his lips. Ardently he kissed the tip of each of her pretty fingers. "Dearest," he said, "I don't know why we are talking so much about the Church and all the funny sorts of Christians there are in the world in the first hours we are together; let's talk about nicer things, things that we've wanted to know for all these unending months. Did you *miss* me awfully, dearest? . . . your letters were sweet, I nearly know them all by heart. But you are clever! Did you think mine awful rot?"

The kiss he took from her smiling lips was Stella's only answer to his question; in his light flannels he looked so fair and athletic that her heart overflowed with pride. In a land of almond-skinned and black-haired people, he seemed a creature of almost unnatural colouring. In a totally different way his features were as correct as an Egyptian's, they were straight and short; and his teeth, though they were almost as perfect as Girgis Boutros's, were not the marked features in his face which the beautiful teeth of an Oriental always appear to be.

"If you've had enough tea," she said, drawing away her hand because laughingly she declared that "his kisses had made it sticky," "let's go ashore and look at the temple, it will be too dark if we don't go at once; I'll just tell mother." Stella knew very well why they had been discussing the subject of Christians and Copts, but she did not inform her lover. It was because suggestion was forcing her to speak about the last topic in the world that she ever wished him to hear. Had she not arranged to meet him at Luxor so as to get away from her fellow-Christians in Cairo? Her conversation had shown her that Vernon had as little idea of the real facts of her social position in

Egypt as she had had before her arrival in Cairo, and she could not tell him. All the wonderful things she had imagined herself saying to him when they first met were forgotten, or could not be said ; she felt that she would have to see him many, many times before she could get back the delicious sense of rest his presence had once afforded her.

They had no sooner set foot on shore than they were surrounded by long-legged, dark-eyed donkey boys, in short, white shirts and white skull-caps, made of coarse crochet, who pestered their lives out to engage them for the hour, or the week, or the year. When the brilliant-eyed rascals became too persistent Stella let them know that she could speak Arabic. Instantly their seemingly modest prices fell to about the quarter of what they had been asking.

There was a good deal of whispering amongst them, for they could not understand why a lady who had never been in Luxor before should speak Arabic like a native, while her husband with the red face did not know one word. Countless curio-dealers implored them to buy their wares, laid out on the dusty highway which divides the temple of Luxor from the river. Vivid green sphinxes, freshly "mummied" hawks, and images of the god Osiris in every possible form were amongst the most popular. The natives always addressed Stella as "My beautiful lady," and spoke of Vernon as "Your genleman."

"Your gen-le-man he buy you this very nice god Osiris ; him very lucky, my lady ; you buy what price you like ! "

"Yes, my lady, him very ancient, two weeks back him dug up in Thebes . . . my word is true, my lady . . . very cheap god."

The only thing Vernon did buy was a fly-switch, as Stella had forgotten to bring her own ashore, and he rather fancied one with very long white hair, and a blue-beaded handle, finished with a tassel of small white cowrie shells.

When they had wandered through the various parts of the vast ruin and glanced at some of the most striking reliefs and statues, Vernon suggested that they should sit down and "take an easy"—he wanted to have Stella's thoughts centred on himself again. Stella had soon discovered that it was the general grandeur and the magic effect of the colouring which appealed to him ; the history and meaning of the various parts of the temple bored him though he tried not to show it when he saw her joy in looking at certain reliefs and statues she recognised as relating to the little store of Egyptology she had laid up in her memory.

They had seated themselves on the drum of a fallen column, and Stella was telling him about the early Christian church that had once been built into a part of the temple, and how the Christians in their mad zeal had smashed the statues, disfigured the reliefs, and desecrated the shrines, not only in the portion they had selected for their church but in the temple generally, when she suddenly stopped and looked round, for she heard a footstep close behind her. As she turned to see who it was her eyes met the eyes of the man who had looked at her with so much interest on the night at the opera. His personality had not faded from her memory; his strong face had appeared to her over and over again at the most unlikely moments. Now, for a reason she was totally unconscious of, she felt the hot blood fly to her face.

He lifted his hat. "I hope you will forgive me," he said—"I have been listening to what you said about the Christian church because I was so much interested, and I was waiting to give you this . . . you dropped it when you rose from where you were sitting near the chapel of Mut. I happened to hear it fall or I should not have seen it."

Stella took the object he handed to her eagerly. "Oh, thank you so much!" she said, "I wouldn't have lost it for worlds." She looked at her gold chain from which the charm had become detached; there were two other charms still left on it. One was a silver hand of Fatma (the daughter of the Prophet), in ancient filigree work; the other was an Italian charm in silver representing St. Joseph and the infant Christ. The one which had just been restored was a triangle of dull green stone, with a hole drilled through it large enough to hold a thick string. It almost resembled a heart.

The stranger smiled when he saw the Christian, Pagan, and Mohammedan charms hanging on the same chain. "You are well protected!"

Stella's eyes smiled . . . "The one you found," she held out the greenish stone, "is pre-Sikelian; it would have been dreadful to have lost it—found in the ruins *here* what confusion it might have caused!"

"May I look at it?" he said. He caressed the smooth surface of the time-worn stone with appreciative fingers. "I don't know the stone; where did it come from?"

"I got it at Ferento, near Viterbo in Italy; I thought it was Roman, for there is an old Roman theatre there, and lots of Roman remains, but an authority told me it was perhaps pre-Sikelian." She turned to Vernon: "You've not seen it. I like to think it has been worn by an unknown people."

"I wonder what *unknown* evil it was supposed to avert," the stranger said, "or what unknown good it was to bring; but if it was worn by a woman it no doubt possessed the same old virtues as all the other charms worn by primitive women possessed; their amulets have never changed."

"What virtue was that?" Vernon asked. "What did they wear it for?"

The girl's eyes half met the eyes of the stranger; they both knew! Already she had discovered that there was much this stranger understood.

"To ensure the birth of sons and keep the love of their husbands." It was the stranger who spoke.

Vernon laughed. "They had only two ideas, two desires, poor things?"

"They are the first desires of every woman still," the stranger said. "Modern or ancient, the real woman changes very little. One notices that in the carvings on the temples; the Egyptians seem to have allowed their women as much freedom as the Greeks; the kings and queens are often represented together. There are some fine women in Egyptian history."

"Yes, indeed; if Egypt never produced a 'Sappho,' it undoubtly has its Queen Elizabeth, and a very remarkable one too. The women of ancient Egypt appear to have been far less restricted than the modern Mohammedan women. I wonder when the custom of veiling and all the other restrictions began—far before the Prophet's time, of course."

"It's a curious thing," the stranger said, "the way women have asserted themselves in history, even in the countries where they apparently play unimportant parts. Japan had a woman for one of its finest poet-philosophers; China has had an Empress whose name will never die out in the history of her country; Egypt had Queen Hatshepset, and Assyria Semiramis; the Jews had many famous women, the fair Esther amongst their number."

Vernon remained almost silent while Stella and the stranger let their conversation drift from one topic to another.

When the stranger left them Vernon said, "How do you know all these things? That chap could have talked on for ever."

"Did he bore you? I thought he was very interesting: he can read most of the cartouches, and he seems to be as taken as I am with the character of Amen-hetep IV. . . . he appears to have read everything there is to be read about him."

Amen . . . what did you say—who was the chap?"

"The heretic king I spoke to you about who tried to overthrow the power of the political priests of Amon-Ra, and teach his people the religion of Truth and Beauty, and the belief that God is in all things—that in worshipping the beauties of nature you are worshipping God."

Vernon laughed. "Good Lord! Who was Amon-Ra?"

"The god who was the supreme god over all the gods in Egypt for a very long period: the priests of Amon-Ra were as strong a political body as the Popes of Rome, and for a far longer period of history."

Vernon looked at Stella with a growing wonder in his eyes. "You talk of all these Johnnies as if they were quite real; they seem as familiar to you as historical characters like Becket and Wolsey are to English schoolboys."

"Indeed, I'm not familiar with them—I wish I were; but they are awfully real to me. All this is awfully real." She pointed to the reliefs carved on the walls. "It's awfully real because Egypt was the beginning of everything. I feel that it was the nursery from which we all sprang. Maspero says that 'Egypt is the mother of most of the ideas that have ruled the world, and the children of that mother are the Copts.'"

"And *I* feel that you're awfully clever." He put his arm tenderly round her. "I'm getting rather alarmed."

Stella turned to him quickly, and looked at him with fear in her eyes. "Don't say that, dearest, it makes me feel I'm a bore." She sighed. "I've wanted to see Upper Egypt, and especially Luxor, for as long as I can remember, and now that I'm actually here, well, it seems too wonderful." She linked her arm in his, and like lovers they again wandered slowly round the great building, looking at things casually and quickly because the girl felt that the man at her side was only interested in the magnificence of the masonry and the gigantic size of the stones and columns; that he only listened to what she told him about the various courts and sanctuaries to please her; that without her by his side he would not have looked at them at all.

CHAPTER VIII

When they returned to the dahabeah Nicolas met them at the gangway with the announcement that Girgis Boutros had arrived, and was discussing some important business with their father. Nicolas watched Stella very closely as he spoke; he saw her face turn a shade paler and her

upper lip tremble. She turned instantly to Vernon. "Girgis is my cousin," she said; "he is a cotton farmer in the Fayyum; he will interest you, I think." There was no time for more talk at the moment, for one of the silent-moving servants, in his jebba of yellow and black striped silk, suddenly began clashing a dinner gong.

Before the second gong had sounded Stella and her lover were both on deck: it was an ideal lovers' hour, full of the sensuous beauty of the East.

Vernon noticed the exquisite simplicity of Stella's dinner gown; her slim straightness appealed to his athletic eye as she stood outlined against the violet-dark of the night sky; the moon had not yet climbed the Theban hills, but the first evening star was glowing like a ship's light above them on a high mast. While Stella had been dressing curious thoughts had been drifting across her mind, half-formed thoughts which made her angry with herself, for they had arisen from the fact that the things which the stranger had said to her in the temple had opened up a sort of chasm in her mind as regards Vernon. Quite unconsciously she had asked herself the question, "When Vernon is not making love to me what shall we talk about? What have we in common? What did we talk about before we were engaged? Now we only seem to talk about ourselves. Shall I bore him in the future? Do I even bore him now?" Then the idea that she might be robbed of his love reduced her to a state of almost nervous exhaustion. Now, standing beside him in the terrible stillness of Africa, under a limitless sky, a sky whose darkness gave shelter to the unseen things of ancient Thebes, things which find cover in the day-time in the tombs of Pharaohs and in the secret places of the sanctuaries, but which draw ever nearer and ever nearer to human souls by night, she was conscious only of the security and delight she felt in his near presence. What did it matter if they never talked at all, when their silence was full of such eloquent understanding?

The feelings Vernon roused in her she did not understand, and as they stirred her into a state of exaltation she interpreted them as the highest love a woman can feel, her love for the man whom Fate has destined to be her other half.

"Stella," Vernon suddenly said, "you look so sweet, I shan't eat one bit of dinner; you really haven't any right to look so delicious. I must hold you in my arms for one minute." They were standing in the bows of the boat, which were curtained off on all sides but the front, so as to form a small smoking-room for the evening when it was chilly.

Stella leant gently towards him. She was pliant as a river reed, and so slender that he swore he could scarcely feel her in his arms. As he pressed kisses on her white throat and closed eyes, she was passive, and unconsciously responsive to his demands. Suddenly they started apart, for Girgis Boutros had silently entered the curtained enclosure.

Vernon looked as though he had seen a ghost, for never before had Girgis looked so curiously Egyptian. His dark eyes shone with anger, his white teeth gleamed under the cruel smile which curled his clearly cut lips—Eastern lips as blood-red as the scarlet of his high tarbush, which gave an added height to his splendid physique. For a moment there was silence, and in that moment Stella knew that the two men would one day hate each other.

Quickly regaining her composure she said, "Vernon, this is my cousin Girgis Boutros. Girgis, this is the Englishman I am going to marry, Vernon Thorpe."

Girgis inclined his head but the quarter of an inch, he did not hold out his hand. Vernon, who had not yet got over the shock of seeing what he called a full-blooded ancient Egyptian, in evening dress, suddenly drop down from the stars (for he had quite forgotten the fact that Stella had mentioned the coming of her cousin), said to the stone image with flashing eyes, "How do you do?" in stiff English fashion: he was only wishing that the image with moving eyes of black glass would jolly well take itself back to wheresoever it had come from, if it was from some Pharaoh's tomb or from the mural decoration of the temple they had just quitted, and leave him alone with Stella.

But Girgis did not go; he stood rooted to the deck, nor could he speak, for his brain was on fire and his passions were maddened by the thought of what he had seen.

He had seen his cousin Hadassah (his pure, virgin cousin as he had thought), his uncle's cherished daughter, in the arms of this red-faced Englishman, this Englishman who was looking at him now with all the contempt that an Englishman shows in his eyes for a man whose skin is darker than his own. It was impossible for him to believe that Stella had not lost her virginity. She had certainly told him that English girls knew the men whom they meant to marry quite intimately; but such an outrageous thing as a lover holding a girl in his arms and kissing her before she was his wife was only possible when the girl had been his mistress.

"What has suddenly brought you to Luxor, Girgis?" Stella asked. "Is anything wrong?"

"I have told your father," he said; "we cannot discuss it, if you please."

Stella smiled and turned to Vernon. "That is how he speaks to me when anything of political importance occurs." She turned to her cousin: "I read about the disturbances in Asiut, and all about the coming election of a new Mudir. If the Copt *is* elected there will be no end of trouble, won't there?"

"He will *not* be elected," Girgis said, "and yet there will be trouble."

"What news have you brought?" "Please tell me: I must hear it all eventually."

"You are a woman. I cannot tell you, if you please. But the English will never allow the election of a Copt as Mudir, even in Asiut."

"How could they?" Stella said; "you know quite well, the position of a Copt Mudir would be an impossible one."

"Why?" Vernon asked. "What is a Mudir?"

"A Mudir holds a high executive post for which a Copt, with his inability to rule, is totally unsuited. His own life would be in danger, as well as those of the authorities who supported him."

"Why?" Vernon asked.

"Because Copts may be prosperous, but they are *not* popular, and my cousin knows it."

"Boutros Pasha! do not forget him, if you please."

"Oh! he was an exception."

"There may be many exceptions if the English would give them the opportunity or look for them."

Vernon listened to him keenly. So Stella's cousin was anti-English as well as a full-blooded native!

Stella laughed. "Oh, Girgis, you know quite well the English have tried them in lots of posts; but where a man of action is needed . . . a man who can command ready obedience from his subordinates and the population generally, they were failures—you can't deny it."

"What chance have they to learn to command when they are always treated as subordinates—subordinates to Moslems in a country ruled by Christians? But it will not always be so: the Copts have the brains of the country, and brains will win in the end."

"If they have no executive qualities they will always have to use their brains for men who can rule; in history that has always been the case, you foolish boy."

"To you I may seem very foolish, but wait and see: the English will not always . . ." he stopped, for at that moment the dinner-gong sounded for the second time.

As they walked towards the dining-room, Stella said to

Vernon, "Please don't think I have no sympathy for the Copts; I have, but I think their grievances are exaggerated; and Girgis knows better than most of us how totally unfit a Copt is to hold the position of Mudir even at Asiut, where nearly all the inhabitants are Christians. We must avoid politics with Girgis; he's awfully wrong-headed."

"How complicated politics are out here! I thought there was only the Pan-Islamic trouble with the English, I had no idea we were so hated all round."

"You aren't hated, and you are hated," Stella said: "the how and why of it you will soon understand, and if you're *just*, you'll see how stiff-necked the British are; I sympathise with the Copts a great deal except when I'm with Girgis . . . he goes too far; I feel very English with him, which angers him most awfully."

"In what way are the British stiff-necked?"

Stella flushed. "Oh, in lots of ways!"

"Why is your cousin so bitter?" he said. "Does he want a job?"

Stella laughed. "Want a *job?* Oh! no, it's partly, I think, because his father's people are Copts, and he resents the position the Copts hold in the eyes of the Government: they fill all sorts of posts as clerks—in the administrative section of the service there are far more Copts than Moslems—but they hold none of the higher posts . . . none of the well-paid positions of authority. Girgis is very wealthy—he has no personal grudge." Stella could not help smiling to herself at the idea of Girgis, with all his wealth, wanting a job.

While they had been talking, Girgis had become lost to sight.

Vernon took her hand in his. "It's awfully hard to realise that you're his first cousin, dear."

"Girgis is rather a dear, and you'll soon discover that Stella Adair died when she left England nine months ago . . ." she looked at him with passionate eyes . . . "You must try to love Hadassah Lekejian a little, Vernon."

"You darling!" he said, "I only wish we were married and alone, just you and I, on this Nile boat, with no Copt cousin or gassing strangers to take you away for one minute from me.

Stella laughed happily. "Were you jealous of the stranger in the temple, dear? I *believe* you were!"

"Of course I was," he said; "he made me feel how stupid I was, how little I could talk to you about all the things that interest you." He paused and then said quickly, "You didn't use to care about all these things."

She pressed his hand and whispered. "Always be jealous like that, dear one."

They had entered the dining-room, and Vernon was amazed at the sight the dinner-table presented. The low lights, which were hidden by the mass of white blossoms, gave an air of mystery to the room, whose walls were covered with the strange figures of animal-gods and with long texts from the Koran in Arabic-writing appliqués of gorgeous hues on grey canvas. Egyptians use these decorative texts for the glorifying of their ceremonial tents on festive occasions.

His place was next to Mrs. Lekejian, who talked to him in English, while Girgis spoke in Arabic to her husband. A Frenchman attached to the French excavation camp at Assouan, was speaking French to Nicolas; they were old college friends. The major-domo of the dahabeah, who was an Italian, always spoke in his own language to the Lekejians, for precautionary reasons.

Vernon was amazed. He had never heard so many languages spoken by a small party with such complete familiarity before; it brought home to him his own limitations, for each time that any one of the party addressed him, it had to be in English; but he and Mrs. Lekejian found plenty to laugh at and talk about. He asked her if she was as keen about the old Egyptian things as her daughter; she confessed that she was not. "My garden has been my hobby," she said; "you can do anything here with a garden, you know, if you have plenty of water . . . these flowers came from it this morning. Stella takes all her intellectual tastes and talents from her father—Syrians are so clever. I used to feel very stupid amongst them at first: they can learn anything they want to."

"You can't think what a duffer I feel," Vernon said; "I can only speak one language, and I don't understand a single thing about anything I see out here except the size of the buildings."

Mrs. Lekejian laughed her girlish, Irish laugh. "Stella knows enough for both of you, I think, so don't feel worried."

"Your nephew can speak French and Italian, and far better English than ever I could speak French." Vernon did not add that in England he had thought a good linguist must be either a diplomat or a waiter—both had to learn languages for his profession or business.

Mrs. Lekejian saw him look at Girgis long and seriously. Both her nephew and her husband were wearing their scarlet tarbushes . . . Girgis' gleaming eyes and black head, and her husband's dignified and patriarchal appearance, gave a very Oriental touch to the scene.

"A penny for your thoughts!" Stella suddenly said as she, too, caught Vernon's absorbed expression.

He started. A guilty flush deepened the delightful pink of his fair skin. "I was thinking," he said in an undertone, "how remarkably good-looking your cousin is, and how serious he is for a chap of his age."

"He is splendid-looking," Stella said; "Did you ever see such wonderful colouring? 'Sun-burning' isn't the word for the mixture of brown and brick-red in his cheeks. . . . He leads such a healthy life, you know . . . in the saddle all day long under a desert sun. On his farm they have the oldest and the newest of everything . . . electric ploughs, if there are such things, and camel-ploughs made of old acacia-wood, working side by side—my cousin is very different from the ordinary wealthy Egyptian."

She was anxious to let Vernon see that Girgis was not a benighted Copt of carly-Christian prejudices, but her lover's eyes gave her no returning smile, he was looking at her cousin as though he were nothing more human or nearly connected to himself and Stella than the images of the animal-gods in scarlet and blue and orange on the walls behind them. Stella had noticed that Girgis during dinner had given her none of his customary polite bows; in his eyes there was a curious expression which she had never seen before. But it pleased her to notice how admirably her brother and Vernon got on together: they seemed to have plenty to talk about, for Nicolas could tell him all about the various clubs, though Vernon was surprised to find that he did not offer to put him up for any one of them. With great tact Mr. Lekejian had kept Girgis talking to himself. He had at once felt the atmosphere of antagonism with which his nephew regarded his future son-in-law, and had taken care that Girgis should not express during the meal any anti-English sentiments. More than once Stella heard her father telling him to be less prejudiced, to talk as he really felt, not as he thought he would *like* to feel; she could not hear all that passed between them, but she could catch enough to know that Girgis, who had been staying with a cousin in Asiut, had brought the latest news of the coming election. Mr. Lekejian had a certain amount of sympathy for the Copts, who considered themselves slighted by the Government; he understood their grievances just as he understood the feelings of an Irish Nationalist, but wide experience had taught him that the English did not treat them unjustly, that their inability to hold high posts of authority was as much regretted by the English as by themselves. Neither the Copts nor the Mohammedans were,

in his opinion, the least capable of ruling their country for their country's good. Self-interest was too deeply engrained in their natures to permit of anything like proper justice to the fellahin.

When they left the dining-room the moon was high enough for Karnak to be illuminated by its light, so Stella begged her lover and Nicolas to hurry over their Arab coffee, and start off. Stella did not ask if Girgis would go with them ; she took it for granted that he was returning by the last train to Cairo. In a very few minutes they were on their way to see the ruins of the mightiest temple on earth. In an excited and happy humour they engaged three splendid white donkeys, gaily bedizened with turquoise necklaces of blue beads and magnificent silver chains, and three tall Egyptians in clinging white shirts with turbaned heads. As they trotted along the road to Karnak, which looked as white as snow in the moonlight, Vernon felt that he had suddenly been transplanted into the book of Genesis. The stately figures they passed were so completely biblical, the things they did so illustrative of the parables in the Old Testament.

Their donkeys, after the custom of the East, preferred to go in Indian file, so conversation was not easy, but he heard Stella and Nicolas now and then speaking to the natives who passed them. This again bewildered Vernon's conservative mind. In London Stella had been, in his idea, a beautiful English girl who had little or no connection with the East, beyond the fact that her parents lived in Cairo. He knew that lots of English people lived in Cairo, so the fact had conveyed very little to him ; he had seen her mother, who was a charming Irishwoman. In Luxor, Stella seemed a different being. To hear her chatting in Arabic with turbaned Orientals riding on hideous brown buffaloes, or with veiled women carrying ridiculous burdens on their hidden heads, gave him an uneasy feeling that she was moving farther and farther away from him.

As they approached the avenue of stone rams lying like crouching beasts at the foot of dark palms which soared into the white moonlight, they met a stately Arab in long black robes ; his head and shoulders were swathed in white, his hands folded serenely across his breast. He salaamed profoundly without uncrossing his arms. He was not a high priest of Amon, but the night-guardian of the temple : it was his duty to show strangers round it. Nicolas assured him that they did not want a guide . . . that they would not attempt to penetrate into the heart of the ruins anywhere alone. "Monsieur Le Grain him very cross ! To all places you wish to go I will go too, my gen-le-man. I

will conduct you, but I will not disturb you ; I understand very well."

"*Tayib*" (good), Nicolas said ; "show us the way : take us first to the grand colonnade and afterwards to some very high point from which we can see the moon shining on the buildings ; but remember we wish silence, not information."

"*Tayib*," the sheikh repeated politely ; "I know my gen-le-man, him no tourist-man. I take you very nice place ; moon him very fine to-night. My lady, you trust me." He bowed profoundly to Stella.

With perfect ease he glided from block to block of the fallen stone amongst the thousands that made an earthquake of ancient marbles, while they followed him with difficulty, picking their way across the ruins, and passing under *pylons* as perfect as the gateways of mediæval castles, and down avenues of leering beasts, while above their heads there soared obelisks and giant columns. Vernon had never imagined such a nightmare of fallen ruins or such grotesque imagery as he saw painted on the walls and columns ; he felt like a beetle or a rat skulking among the ruins of a mightier and grander world.

CHAPTER IX

When they found themselves in the "Hall of the Columns," the mightiest of the mighty buildings which the great Rameses completed and set his seal upon—even Vernon gasped, but not a word was spoken. The sheikh took himself off, as silently as a shadow, to a comfortable resting-place on the top of a fallen column. He curled himself up like a cat and began to smoke ; soon he was fast asleep. Stella sat down between Nicolas and Vernon and slipped a hand into an arm of each ; she wanted humanity close to her.

For a little time they were afraid to speak. The silence which surrounded them was Egyptian in its depths. It was a silence suggestive of the distant Sahara, a silence expressive of untrodden sands and the stillness of uncounted centuries.

Nicolas spoke first. "It's curious," he said, "how the Egyptian statues, which look so prim and so *unreal* by day, become so terribly human by moonlight. I thought that row of Osirises with folded arms looked amazingly human as we passed them. They were like a guard of living giants protecting the temple."

Stella shivered. "I feel as if a thousand things had come to life again, things with unfriendly eyes that follow

us from point to point, things we can't *see*, with eyes we only *feel*." She gave a sigh. "It's quite comforting to look up at the sky and see the friendly stars shining down upon us between the columns—there's nothing sinister about them."

In a few minutes Nicolas rose and left them; he made it his excuse that he wanted to measure the circumference of the largest of the fallen drums. He had not been gone more than two minutes before Vernon's arm was slipped round Stella's waist, and he had taken one of her hands in his own.

Stella sat in exquisite content: the magnetic contact of her lover, mingled with the mysteriousness of her surroundings, rendered her incapable of clear and practical thought.

At intervals in the wonderful silence Vernon pressed her hand a little closer, and she, knowing what he meant, leant towards him and raised her lips silently to his. Her thoughts were not wholly of the man at her side, but his human presence was comforting, and the very practical turn of his imagination helped her.

"What are these dogs making that infernal barking for?" he asked.

"To protect the farms which lie far out on the Libyan desert—they are quite close to the hills. Wolves come at night and attack the sheep."

"Is it still as wild at that, with Luxor lying so near? By Jove! it's wonderful."

"It is very wild over there. Nicolas and I rode out to see a Coptic monastery—such a weird old place, like a collection of bee-hives! But the dogs terrified me: they were quite as savage as wolves. I thought they would tear the donkey-boys to pieces." She started, and stopped speaking, for Girgis Boutros had suddenly appeared in front of them. His eyes were fixed on Vernon, whose lips were stealing a kiss from Stella's throat. "Oh, Girgis," Stella said, "how you startled me! I had no idea you were coming to Karnak. How on earth did you know where to find us?"

"Your donkey-boy is standing at the outer *pylon*—he told me where you were."

"But how did *he* know? The *pylon* is half a mile away!"

Girgis shrugged his shoulders. "I do not know: *how is* everything known in Egypt?"

Stella shivered. "How indeed! I always feel that everything knows—even the buffaloes: they've known everything since prehistoric times."

Stella felt ill at ease; she saw that Vernon resented the

intrusion of her cousin, and did not mean to make himself agreeable. As nothing was said between them, and Girgis evidently did not intend to go and leave them to enjoy each other's company alone, she rose to her feet. Though she made no noise, the sleeping guardian instantly uncurled himself from the flat top of the fallen drum of sandstone, and, gliding over the mass of ruins as easily as though he was walking on a polished floor, was at her side.

"My lady, she like to sit up very high and see all the temples of the world, under the full moon?"

"Yes," Stella said, "call my brother and tell him we are going."

"Yes, my lady . . . I go find your brother very soon; him looking at lotus obelisk.

Stella thought Girgis might have offered to go with the guardian and leave her to enjoy the society of her lover in solitude, but he did not . . . there was something about him to-night which unconsciously angered her. His silence was laden with antagonism, his eyes expressed the same horror at her lover's intimacy as they had done earlier in the evening; she felt nervous and oppressed. It was quite a relief when Nicolas and the guardian re-appeared; even then, without wishing it, she found herself walking with Girgis some little way behind the others, she was conscious of having obeyed his will.

Suddenly he spoke to her in words which ought to have startled her, but they did not—he had in some curious way forced his thoughts upon her. "You will not marry this Englishman," he said; "why do you let him kiss you? Why is he like a husband or a master?"

Stella stopped. "Why do *you* speak to me like that, Girgis? You have no right to! I will marry him; he loves me . . ." her voice trembled. "I am *engaged* to him, that is why he may kiss me."

"I love you too," he said, "but I would not insult you in that manner. I would give you everything you ask for in the world: you are my star, I will follow you. If you marry this man you will be untrue to your owr people, you will be always unhappy."

"Don't—I am going to marry Vernon—how cruel of you to say such things!" Her words were almost a cry.

"I am your cousin, and *I* would not despise your people . . . for they are my people. I would give you all my moneys to help to raise the ignorant—you can be their saviour! . . ."

"Vernon does not despise them—how dare you say so? Oh, Girgis, it's so cruel of you to speak of such things when I was so happy!"

"He already despises me, and I know it, if you please, and *you* also know it! You are destined, like the Esther of old, to save your people; this man will not let you. If he marries you he will separate you from them for ever, and do his best to make every one think you are English."

"You don't know, you don't understand; if you despise him, why shouldn't he despise you? . . ."

"No," he said, interrupting her, "I hate him"; and as he said the words all the sinister meaning of the unseen forms filled the temple, and all the graven images which looked down at them from the high places seemed to echo his words . . . "I hate him, he despises your people."

"You hate him," she said, "because *I* love him, because he has made me happy? It is unkind of you." Her fear of his anger made her almost conciliatory in her manner of speaking to him; her fear was for Vernon.

"I hate him because he will make you *un*happy, because already he treats you . . . as his 'darling' . . . he does not respect you or he would not do it." (He used the word which Orientals in Cairo use for an Englishman's mistress.)

"It is your Oriental mind that makes you think such things." Her anger was rising. "What is the matter with you to-night? You imagine all sorts of evil things: I will not even be your friend if you cannot behave with proper respect to me. What has angered you?"

"I cannot tell you, if you please . . . but it is not *I* who do not treat you with proper respect, for I saw you in his arms! In England does a man marry the young woman who allows him to hold her in his arms, the woman whom he kisses like a dancing-girl? Does your brother know and permit him to live?"

Stella laughed. Poor Girgis, with his Eastern notions of veiled and unseen brides, how it must have shocked him! He had evidently never imagined that engaged couples kissed one another—her anger cooled. "Of course he does, you foolish boy; I am going to marry him; he is an Englishman . . . in England lovers are allowed to kiss each other—there is no harm in that."

"I am not a boy, if you please, I am a man; but, as you say, I *do not* understand! The English are very improper, yet they are proud of the position their women hold. I see no modesty in Englishwomen if that is what they allow; you should not have been educated there."

"It is because their minds are so modest that they can do these things. I don't believe any Oriental could ever understand how innocent and pure an English girl's mind

is, or how respectfully her lover thinks of her and kisses her."

"Will you explain it to me, if you please?"

"I cannot," Stella said, "it is too difficult; but it is true—you must live amongst English people to understand it."

"It is, you say, because an Englishman's *mind* is so pure that he may kiss and hold in his arms a virgin . . . if it is so pure why does he wish to kiss her, why does he wish to hold her in his arms, why is he not content to behave to her as a brother or father behaves?"

"You contort things so oddly, you see things from such an Eastern point of view. It is more like this." She thought for a moment. "A man who wishes only to drink a little wine may safely do it, but the man who wishes to drink wine to get drunk must not drink wine at all. Now do you understand?"

"You think an Oriental only wishes to kiss a woman because his thoughts are sensual and carry him further?"

"Yes," Stella said, interrupting him, "he does not kiss her because he loves her as an Englishman loves her."

"I have never been in England, but I have seen the behaviour of many Englishmen in Cairo. I think they have not the same *customs* as Orientals, but when they are in Egypt they have the same minds . . . perhaps in their own country they are different . . . I do not know."

. . . . . .

By climbing up a mound of debris which had accumulated against its side walls, they had reached the top of a high *pylon* or temple gateway. Stella gave a little cry of relief and delight. The wonderful scene which had suddenly unfolded itself to them was bathed in the white light of the full moon. The *pylons* of the many temples which surrounded the great mother-building stood up bold and free; the avenues of crouching rams and lions looked mysterious and sinister; the mud villages of the desert, under the gentle moon, lay desolate and Pharaonic. In the far distance the food-giving Nile lay like a ribbon of silver stretching across the irrigated land.

The whole world was serene and silent. But for the deep shadow thrown by the high courts at their feet, and the blackness of the palm trees against the clear sky, the hour might have been midday in an English winter, for there was light with a total absence of sun.

They found seats, and their talk drifted to the view before them and of the suitability of the houses and customs of the natives to the ancient buildings which surrounded them. These houses added rather than detracted from the general picturesqueness. It is the Koran again we

have to thank for that," Nicolas said, "for it forbids all changes: everything ought to remain as it was in the Prophet's time with the true believers, which means that Eastern customs and Eastern dress are to-day as they were six hundred years after Christ."

"What a jolly good thing they *became* Mohammedans!' Vernon said. "They look ripping; it's like living in the Bible . . . that big temple might be the temple of Solomon and that old Arab guide one of the high priests."

"That is the selfish view the English take of this country," Girgis said; "they do no care for the progress of the people, they only wish the country to remain picturesque for them to visit."

"Perhaps it is rather a selfish view," Vernon said good-naturedly, "but the people seem quite happy, and perfectly content—I don't see why they need change, do you, Stella? Progress, as you call it, doesn't seem to do them much good, judging from the specimens we get in trade."

Girgis did not let Stella speak. "They are to stand still, and be treated like picturesque children for the English to govern and photograph . . . but I have read of *nothing* that can stand still, if you please. Everything must go back or go forward: if it were not for the Koran Egypt would go forward . . . it will go forward without the Koran. . . ." He spoke meaningly. "That is why you English like the Koran, why the English sympathise with the Mohammedans and ignore the Christians: the advancement of the Christians would mean the advancement of Egypt, but the English do not advance them, they suppress them and give their assistance to the Mohammedan who can never rule his own country, for he cannot progress; but now all countries must progress . . . it is the age of progress."

"Oh, Girgis," Stella said, "I will not allow politics to be talked to-night." She spoke laughingly, but she was in earnest, and her cousin knew it."

"Yet only at dinner-time you said, 'Talk politics to me—in England women are interested in the affairs of their country.' You will excuse me, if you please; I did not know you were not speaking the truth; I have much of your customs yet to learn."

He looked so politely apologetic that Nicolas said, "It's all right, old chap, only you must remember that Mr. Thorpe looks at things from an English point of view; he has not got hold of all the fine points of our complicated scheme of politics."

He turned to Vernon and tried to make excuses for his cousin's outburst. "You know Girgis is not an idle

theorist, he is doing all he can for the progress of his country-people. His farm is quite a model, and he's making it pay, too—what's more. Besides improving the land and the agricultural methods of the fellahin, he pays himself for Christian teachers to instruct the Coptic children in the village schools on his estates in Upper Egypt."

"Does not the Government pay for them?"

"Only when there are a sufficient number of Christian scholars at the school; but the Christian population of the district is allowed to supply a teacher for the school if it wishes to. Girgis is one of the few wealthy Copts who sees that it is done in his district by putting his hand in his pockets."

"The Christians pay the same taxes as the Mohammedans, but they don't have the teachers," Girgis said. "I only do a little. . . . I am not married, I am rich, if you please; it is very simple for me."

"Do be fair, Girgis," Stella said: "these schools were originally endowed as Koran schools . . . schools where nothing but the Koran was taught. Many of them were endowed by Mohammedans for that purpose. Now that the Government insists on other subjects being taught . . . it would be unfair to have a Copt master for the very small percentage of Christian scholars who attend them. The Christian children get taught all the other subjects, but the Government does not supply the religious teaching—isn't that nearly it, Nicolas?" she asked.

"Yes," Nicolas said, "pretty nearly."

"It is not the Christian religion itself that I so much think about," Girgis said, "it is that for the progress of the country a progressive form of religion amongst the governing peoples is necessary . . . the Koran is retrogressive; our boys must not grow to be men without any religion, they are too savage for that, and so if they go to their schools they will have the Koran or nothing—that is all, if you please."

"Up till now I never knew that there were any native Christians in Egypt," Vernon said; . . . it seems to me that they have some cause for complaint . . . what do you think?" He turned to Nicolas. . . .

"The English have a difficult time of it," Nicolas said; "and I think the Copts should have more patience: they certainly possess the brains of the country, but it will take them many generations before they can rise above the position of servitude and degradation they have held. You can't imbibe the qualities necessary for command, and the power to enforce obedience and respect, as quickly as you can amass facts. . . . The Copts are quick to learn

new methods, new customs, but for centuries they have been shut off from all positions of dignity and authority, so they have lost the governing instinct."

"Are all Copts anti-English?" Vernon asked.

"The very opposite: the Christian papers are all *for* the English. *Girgis* is not anti-English really, *he* knows what England has done for the country. . . ."

"Would the Copts rather have Moslem rule again?"

"Oh no!" said Girgis quickly. "We only want justice from the English."

"Even the Nationalist movement was *anti*-Turkish once," Nicolas said. "The Pan-Islam feeling was evolved out of it; the uneducated people can only understand the Pan-Islam feeling now. It was a party cry; they were caught by it, for they could understand the old teaching that it is degrading for a Moslem to be ruled by a Christian: the educated Nationalists knew how to appeal to them."

Vernon lit a cigarette. "It seems to me that people take their religion out here much more seriously than we do at home."

"The Christians only want fair treatment," Girgis repeated; "they wish to share equally with the Moslems the positions which the Government gives to the natives, and to see their country allowed to progress."

"But, Girgis, father says that there are even more Government posts held by Copts than by Moslems."

"That is true. They are the poorly paid, humbler posts, posts which carry no pensions, the posts which the Moslems have not the intelligence to fill."

"Then it *is* a case of £ *s. d.* after all, rather than religion," Vernon said laughingly, "it generally is—human nature is the same all the world over."

"Of course that is the chief point," Girgis said—"is it not natural?—but they also wish that under Christian rule the Christians in Egypt generally should be treated better socially; it would raise them in the eyes of the Mohammedans, it would restore to them their self-respect."

Stella felt her cheeks grow warm with the blood which mounted to her very hair, her pulses quickened. What would Girgis say next?

"How are they treated?" Vernon asked.

"As outcasts," Girgis said . . . he turned his onyx eyes on Stella, he saw her lips tremble and the blood leave her face as quickly as it had come into it.

"All Christians, do you mean—the rich as well as the poor?"

Girgis did not speak. Vernon looked towards Nicolas for an answer.

It was Stella who spoke. "Nearly all," she said very quietly. "The English will not receive any one, you know, who mixes with the natives socially."

"Ah! there you have it," Vernon said; "it is because they are *natives*, not because they are Christians." He stopped, for, like a flash of lighning, the fact faced him that Stella was what the English would call a native! . . . For a moment his blood ran cold and he felt as though he were paralysed: why had he never thought of it before? What a fool he was—for Girgis, her full cousin, looked as Egyptian as any of the reliefs cut on the monster columns of the temple which lay bathed in the moonlight before them! Vernon gazed at him as he stood on the top of the high *pylon*, his fine profile and perfect figure silhouetted against the clear night sky. He had to admit that Girgis was beautiful. His thoughts ran quickly over his short acquaintance with Stella, and his first meeting with her. She had been his sister's devoted school-friend—was it possible that she had known at that time of the gulf that lay between her people and his? He was sure she had not; he was convinced that she thought of herself always as an Englishwoman, that her mother's Irish blood was so much stronger in her veins than her father's Syrian, that all that was Eastern in her nature had been wiped out by her upbringing in England. Then he remembered what she had said to him only a few hours ago, that so much had changed in her life, that she had almost expected him to be changed too. Poor Stella! his heart was filled with pity for her; his strong hand sought hers, for Nicolas and Girgis had turned their backs to the lovers.

Stella let her hand rest in his; she wanted his arms round her and his whispered assurance that, she was Stella Adair to *him*, and that his love for her was unchanged; but she had to remain contented with his sympathetic pressure of her hand. She did not know that he had suddenly realised all that she dreaded his knowing; she was unaware how much of the true meaning of her words he had grasped—words which some power stronger than herself had spoken. Then a tumult of revolt attacked her. Why was she ashamed of her father's ancient race? Why was she ashamed of her own father? Why was she ashamed of being Hadassah Lekejian? Was it just because her lover belonged to the race of prejudiced rulers who despised the East, this lover, whose mind rarely travelled on the same plane as her own, but whose fine manhood had stirred and aroused new senses in her being?

She despised herself for feeling as she did—that now she was in Egypt, she was her lover's social inferior. But was she his inferior except in the eyes of prejudice?

She could not say that her present inequality in the eyes of the English was all prejudice, for before her there rose up a picture of Girgis's mother's friends and relations . . . these dreadful overfed, over-dressed Levantines. . . . How could Vernon mix with them? . . . Her mind revolted at the idea of his fairness coming in contact with women whose skins were oily, and whose hair was heavy with Egyptian darkness. If only they were not so *fat*, if only they were not so highly scented and richly dressed! She thought of her own slenderness: would she, too, one day look Levantine? Then suddenly she was comforted by the memory of her mother, whose Irish elegance of figure was still girlishly perfect; then she saw her father rise up before her mind's eye. He was not elegant like her brother Nicolas, but there was not one ounce of spare flesh on his bones, and his dignity of bearing gave distinction to his whole being. And her aunt, Girgis's mother, although she was quite Eastern in her soft beauty, was no fatter than the majority of elegantly dressed Frenchwomen who wintered in Cairo.

All those figures passed like a mirage before Stella's mental vision; and all the time Vernon held her hand lovingly in his. But a cloud had fallen upon their night of clear shining, and Nicolas felt that it was time to suggest getting back to Luxor. He captured Girgis, and left Stella to come as slowly as she liked with Vernon. When they were alone Vernon was dearer and gentler than Stella had ever known him; his boyish simplicity touched her, and his genuine delight, when she suggested a long donkey-ride the next morning to Thebes or to the "Tombs of the Kings," made her laugh, for he did not conceal from her that what thrilled him in the idea had nothing to do with the wonders of ancient Egypt, but with the canter by her side on swift-footed donkeys across that plain of Arcady which lies between Thebes and the Nile. Vernon had so successfully hidden the horrible shock he had received at his sudden realisation of her true position in Cairo that Stella imagined that he had not grasped the importance of her words.

"You won't let Girgis come, dear, will you?" Vernon asked. "Do let us be quite alone for our first whole day together!"

"He *shan't* come—I'll tell Nicolas not to let him." She laughed nervously. "Isn't he funny the way he comes?"

"He doesn't come, he just drops down in front of us. I never saw such a chap—he's uncanny."

"He is odd," Stella said, "but try not to dislike him, dear, he is so much nicer than most of the young men of his race."

"He hates me; I can feel it."

"He's jealous of you."

"Of me?" Vernon looked astonished. "What's he got to be jealous of me for? I've only just met the chap!"

"He's jealous of you because *I* love you"—Stella spoke very softly.—"and he imagines he loves me."

"Great Scott! he doesn't imagine *you* could love him does he—that damned granite monument with glass eyes? Confound his native cheek!"

Stella shivered . . . "Oh! Vernon, he's my cousin."

Vernon noticed that she shivered. "So he is; I forgot . . . Great Scot!" The last words were spoken slowly; then he lapsed into silence. He could not say he was sorry; something hardened in him! . . . the man had no right to be Stella's cousin! Stella had no right to see anything of him if she was sensitive to his attitude.

Stella stopped and withdrew her hands from his grasp. "He *is* my cousin, and he is in every way my equal. I am very proud of him, although he behaved foolishly to-night."

Her eyes were fixed on Vernon's as she spoke. "Can you bear it, Vernon?" she said sadly; "will your love for me prove stronger than your inherited prejudices of racial differences?"

Vernon's eyes did not flinch under her earnest gaze, but he answered her question by evasion. "What do you mean, darling—strong enough for what? I *love* you, that is all I know."

"I mean that Girgis Boutros belongs to my father's people and that I, who felt like an English girl until nine months ago, now know that I belong to my father's people too . . . I know by all that has happened in these nine months, by the cruelty of neglect and scorn, that I can never betray my people, that I must always belong to them."

"I wouldn't ask you to forsake them completely."

"You might, Vernon, for I wanted to when I learnt something about my position, I said to myself, 'It is only for a little time; Vernon will take me to England; I need never see or hear of Copts or Levantines or Moslems again'; but now I know that that could never be . . . the man who marries me must accept my people: can you, dearest?"

She looked so beautiful with her pleading, upturned face

lit by the moonlight, that Vernon, still only understanding the half of what her words really meant, said: "Darling, your people will be my people, and my people your people —why let's bother about the subject? . . . I admit that I don't understand Girgis or take much to him, but I dare say I shall get to like him. I'm sure he's a good sort, if you say so; besides, I like a fellow who loves his job: he's awfully keen about farming, isn't he? I'd rather like to see his estate." Vernon expressed the last wish merely to please Stella.

"We'll go," Stella said. "It would please father if you did —he thinks an awful lot of Girgis. So many rich young men of his class care only for horse-racing, and gambling, and theatres . . . Girgis loves the land, and all that he can make come out of it."

"He's awfully handsome," Vernon said; "he looks as if he was cut out of granite."

"In many ways he is cut out of granite," Stella said: "you'd be surprised how callous he is about individuals: the sufferings of the poor mean nothing to him, although he is doing all this to try and educate them, and develop their ideas in agriculture. I think Egyptians have always been without pity . . . it's been wanting in them ever since the days of the Pharaohs, who looked upon the people as so many units in the land for labour."

"Then what is all this talk about raising the standard of the poor?"

"That's for Egypt, that's for the progress of the country; Girgis is mad on national progress."

"I see," Vernon said.

"Girgis is seized with the desire to restore the glory that was Egypt's . . . to develop her riches, to raise her poor," said Stella.

"Curious chap!" Vernon said thoughtfully. "Is he all theories? Does he care about his own relations?"

"I don't know," Stella said; "the ordinary Egyptian who inherits many of the old characteristics of his race, as Girgis does, for he is *far* more Egyptian than Syrian, has great affection for his sons but very little for any one else, and not much of the Christian quality of pity, for pity only came into the world, it seems to me, with the teachings of Christ; but most of Christ's teachings are forgotten by the Copts, poor things! They have sacrificed Christ for His Church."

"I suppose pity never did exist in the old days, did it?"

"Christ's pity came like a beautiful and tender song from heaven. When you think of what the East was when Christ began His mission, how extraordinary He

must have seemed!—but I'm sure *I* should have loved Him, for I believe I'm rather socialistic; at least, I have been lately."

Vernon looked at her to see if she was in earnest. "You are funny," he said; "I never met such a rum girl, you think about such odd things."

"Why?" she said. "Because I love Christ's personality?"

"No," he said, "its the way you look at things."

"Then don't let me," she said eagerly, "for I want to be just ordinary, not extraordinary."

"Why?"

"Because I want to be quite like an English girl for your sake. I could never forsake my people, but all the same, I want to be *like* the English girl I feel myself to be, that I thought I was before I came out here."

Vernon laughed heartily. "You are cutting," he said; "to be quite English you think you must be very ordinary and entirely wanting in originality—is that it?"

Stella pinched his arm lightly by way of an answer. "Here we are: there's poor Nicolas holding his soul in patience, and Girgis contemplating Egypt." She sighed. "I think every one should have a lover to-night, don't you? That moon's quite wasted on those two."

He stooped and took his last kiss from her youthful lips before her donkey-boy brought "Lord Roberts" for her to mount.

. . . . . .

When they stepped on board the *Isis*, Mrs Lekejian handed Vernon a telegram: it was his recall to Cairo. His senior officer was ill, and he was wanted to fill his place, so the morning ride to Thebes on the swift-footed "Horace," with Stella at his side on "Lord Roberts," was postponed until his return.

. . . . . .

When Stella said good-bye to him in the morning, Vernon saw that her sadness meant more than the mere parting with him for perhaps only a few days. At last he said, "Dearest, if you are going to be a soldier's wife, you must learn to bear partings better than this—I might never be going to see you again."

"You may never *want* to see me again: you will be mixing in Cairo society, you will see for yourself the way we are looked down upon; you'll find every one's the same, you'll never stand out against it." Tears filled her eyes and her voice betrayed the depth of her emotion. "I did so want

to have just one week of you all to myself before you heard us discussed in Cairo."

"Dearest," he said, "you're exaggerating things. Don't be so foolish; I think you should trust me."

CHAPTER X

During Vernon's absence in Cairo, which eventually extended itself to twelve days, Stella made up her mind to see as much as she possibly could of Thebes, before her lover's return, so as not to bore him with hard sight-seeing: also her mind would be too fully occupied to allow her thoughts to dwell upon the mysteries of "Cairene society" her lover would be having unfolded to him. That particular twelve days were the happiest in her life, for in her sight-seeing, she had the companionship of the tall stranger whom she had met in the temple of Luxor, the man whose sympathy she had read when their eyes met at the supper party in the Arab restaurant.

Michael Ireton with no little ingenuity for a man of his direct and straightforward nature, had contrived to get into conversation with Nicolas Lekejian in the smoking-room of the Winter Palace Hotel. During the course of their conversation Nicolas had discovered, as Michael Ireton had intended that he should do, that by introductions he had presented on his arrival in Cairo he knew many of the best families in the English society there. He also discovered he was no mean Egyptologist, which made him a desirable companion in a place like Luxor. The very morning after their meeting, Michael Ireton had learnt, with the help of his donkey-boy, that Stella was going over to visit the great Valley of the Tombs of the Kings. A sudden determination to go with her devastated him; he could not remember when he had wanted to do anything so much. To ride through that hidden valley which lay across the river under the pink sunlight, that valley lined with the secret mortuaries of the eternal Pharaohs, with that girl by his side, was worth striving to do. He was convinced that his meeting with her in the temple of Luxor was the result, of his fixed determination not to let her pass out of his life; his will had triumphed—he had found her and spoken to her, he was now in a position to see more of her. Vernon's presence with her in the temple had worried him once or twice. What was the explanation of it?—for had not his friend in the opera-house told him that neither she nor her people mixed in English society in Egypt?

He never dreamt for one moment that Stella was engaged to the man: Vernon's evident lack of interest in the things which she had seemed so keen about gave him the impression that they had not much in common, although they seemed to be on intimate terms of friendship.

A good donkey-boy must be a good scout! Intrigue being the breath of life to him, it pleased the handsome Yussef to bring his master all the information he could about the beautiful young lady on board the *Isis*. He scouted so well that his master was on the ferry-boat which conveyed Stella and Nicolas and their favourite donkeys across the Nile on their journey to Thebes, and he managed to look so perfectly innocent of the fact that he had waited for a good half-hour for their arrival that Nicolas proved quite willing to let him, at his diffident request, join in their day's excursion. In this wise he managed to spend almost the whole day by Stella's side. And if she found him such an interesting companion that she almost forgot to miss Vernon, was it to be wondered at? She soon found out that he had taken up Egyptology as his hobby.

Michael Ireton: very broad shoulders and strikingly powerful physique, added to six feet two inches of height, made him seem splendidly big even in a land of tall men. His profession as mining engineer had placed him since his earliest years of independence in positions of great authority; in some of his expeditions through Mexico and Brazil he had had as many as a thousand natives under his command, and had controlled vast sums of money. Now, at thirty-three there was nothing little about Michael Ireton: his methods of dealing with difficulties, or of arriving at desired ends, were almost primitive in their directness.

His rough sketches were perhaps as illustrative of his real nature as anything else, for some of them were full of the tenderest effects of light and shade: the indescribable light of Egypt seemed to have floated on to his paper: they did not seem the work of human hand with paint and water; while his character sketches of the natives, which he dashed off with lightning speed, sent Nicolas and Stella into screams of laughter. They were life-like in their types and gestures, and showed an instinctive conception of their natures.

Their talk had been of many things, while they were still on the green plain which is every year watered by the inundations of the Nile; but when they passed into The Great Valley, and had left all traces of human habitation behind them, they lapsed into silence. As they rode on and on, into a deeper and deeper sense of its unearthly

desolation, they felt lost to all other consciousness. Their knowledge that the great dead of Egypt's Great Day lay in vast tombs, as grand as temples, under the pink rocks which rolled on and ever silently on, at either side of their winding road, was forgotten; it seemed rather as if they had discovered for themselves a valley of glorious light, a valley forgotten by the world since the day when the finger of God had first produced Cosmos out of chaos.

Stella became to herself a mere particle of that opal light, her material body had no consciousness, and Michael Ireton's presence by her side did not disturb the illusion, for, he seemed to be in complete sympathy with her feelings, his silence was full of spiritual understanding.

Later on in the day, when they were eating their lunch, on a picnic spot Yussef had cleverly discovered for them, where the shadow of a mighty rock in a dry land was gracious, their conversation flowed again more freely. Nicolas had suggested that they should visit one of the most famous tombs in the valley, but Stella begged him not to.

"I only want the valley and the light to-day," she said, and turned to Michael Ireton. "You of course must do just as you like. Would you prefer to leave us after lunch and go your own way?"

"I would much rather not," he said simply, "that is to say, if I *may* stay? I don't feel inclined to leave this light for all the wonders of the underworld."

"I'm glad you feel like that," Stella said contentedly; "it's so nice doing things with kindred spirits."

Michael Ireton felt happiness run through him at her words like a quickening fire. "Kindred spirits are few and far between," he said. "How an ordinary tourist would jar!"

"But we are ordinary tourists, we're '*doing*' the Valley of the Tombs of the Kings for the first time."

"Tourists we *may* be, but not 'ordinary'; I bar that." Stella laughed.

"The ordinary English tourist hasn't the slightest idea what this valley meant to the Egyptians," Nicolas said. 'The ordinary English tourist doesn't even want to know; he looks upon the whole thing as an excursion."

"I do think that if the ordinary American tourist is the most vulgar in the world, the ordinary English tourist is the most ignorant. I'm awfully ashamed of my race sometimes, aren't you?" Michael Ireton addressed Stella.

"Ignorance is one of the sins even the English cannot accuse *my* race of," she said. "I often think it's our want of ignorance that so annoys them," her words dropped acidly from her lips.

Michael Ireton looked at her with a well-disguised ignorance of her nationality in his expression, yet Stella felt that he knew she was not English, and that for some reason of his own he was making her speak of her nationality. "Do you mean that you are *not* English?" he said.

"No, I am Syrian; my name is Lekejian." She said the words a little aggressively, as much as to say, "There now!"

"Do you live in Syria? I want to go there so much, to Baalbek and Palmyra: they must be wonderful."

"I have never visited my own country. I'm almost as much of a 'tourist,'" she smiled at the word, "as *you* are in Luxor, although my father's family have lived in Cairo for many generations. I know shockingly little about Syria."

"You ought to be very proud of the influence your race had upon the civilisation of Egypt," said Michael Ireton. He turned to Stella: "Wasn't the mother of your favourite King Akhnation, or 'The Living Truth' as he called himself, a Syrian?"

"Yes, I'm always proud of that, for history attributes a great deal to her influence over her son. It was she who first inoculated him with his very modern views on religion . . . How beautiful his beliefs were!"

"I was glad to discover that the only one of all the ancient deities Akhnation ever had carved on any of his monuments *after* his conversion, was the image of Truth; even then '*Maat*' is only represented as a tiny figure held in his hand, which showed that it betokened merely the abstract idea of truth."

From this allusion to her favourite king Stella led him on to tell her more about the imaginative and emotional influence of Syria over Egyptian art.

"I'm beginning to feel quite proud, of my habitually despised country," Stella cried delightedly.

From the effect of Syrian influence on Egyptian art their talk turned to Egyptian architecture. Michael Ireton confessed that it did not give him the pleasure Greek architecture did. "Its total lack of grace leaves you cold," he said, "its only emotion comes from its size. Have you ever seen the Greek temples in Sicily?" he asked, his eye kindling with artistic pleasure at the thought of them.

"No," Stella said, "I have never been to Sicily; I am keeping that——" She stopped suddenly, for what *was* the use of keeping them for Vernon?

"I should like to *see* you there," he said. "I should like to take you to Segesta when the wild flowers are at

their best. I often used to wonder if the Greeks ever saw their temples rising out of an ocean of purple flowers. . . .

"I should love to go," she said, "for flowers give that endearing charm to scenery which is entirely missing in Egypt; here the magic 'light' has to make up for the flowers . . ." she paused, "and it does cast its spell over you?"

"Rather!" he said enthusiastically. "Before I came to Egypt I never realised that in Upper Egypt, at any rate, there is nothing green except what grows with artificial irrigation; there are, now that I think of it, a very few 'wicked' looking plants that seem to find suction in dry sand, but they're Nature in her most unnatural mood."

During their conversation Michael Ireton had been conjuring his brains how he was going to manage to see Stella again the next day. A happy chance soon presented itself, for she had lent him her gold pencil-case to write down the names of some books he had advised her to read. A little to her surprise he closed the pencil up after he had written down the names, and put it in his pocket. Stella was mounting her donkey at the moment, so she could not hold out her hand to claim it. As he put it in his pocket he said to himself, "I'll be careful *not* to give her a chance of getting it back to-day, which will necessitate my returning it to her early to-morrow morning."

As they cantered home across the green plain of Arcady they talked lightly of many things, and Stella helped him to add to his by no means small store of Arabic words, and gave him hints about their pronunciation.

When they were saying good-bye he handed his card to Nicolas, who expressed a wish that he should accompany them on some future expeditions if he cared to.

"Care to!" he said; "this has been one of the most enjoyable days in my life—it's been most awfully kind of you to let me come with you." He looked at Stella as he spoke. "Finding that little green heart certainly brought me good luck. I attribute it all to that."

"My precious *hegab* (amulet)," she said, putting her hand in his as she used the Arabic word for his benefit, as she also did when she said good-bye—"*A ma as-sallamah*!

"It's not good-bye, I hope," he said, "only *auf wiedersehn*."

CHAPTER XI

THERE was to be no excursion next morning, for Nicolas was suffering from a little touch of the sun. Stella expressed herself perfectly contented to prowl about Luxor by herself; her father and mother allowed her to do so because in Luxor the inhabitants are accustomed to seeing tourists strolling about their village, and in Upper Egypt the natives are much more respectful to women than in Cairo. So, armed with a fly-switch and her sketching materials, Stella had just stepped ashore when she met Michael Ireton coming towards their landing-stage.

"I foolishly carried off your gold pencil-case last night," he said; "I was just coming to return it to you."

Stella blushed behind her thick veil.

"Thank you," she said as she held out her hand for it, for while she had been dressing in the morning she had said to herself, "We must see him again, for he is certain to return my pencil," and the thought had made her sing more light-heartedly—ah! how full of enjoyment life was! Her conversation with Michael had set a thousand interesting ideas working in her head; his sketches had given her new aspirations; the few hints she had stolen from his style she was going to try and put into execution that very morning.

"Are you going any expedition to-day?" He asked the question with a request in his voice.

"Not to-day; Nicolas doesn't feel very well, and I thought I would enjoy a quiet prowl about Luxor."

"But can you prowl about alone? Is it safe?"

"Oh, I think so; I will take my donkey-boy to carry my things," she pointed to her sketching materials, "and he'll keep the beggars off: set a thief to catch a thief in the East."

"May *I* be your donkey-boy? I think I could keep off most beggars."

Stella smiled. "I think you could," she said, "but aren't you going for an excursion?"

"Not if I may stay with you, and I promise you I won't be a nuisance. He drew his sketch-book from his pocket: "I want to sketch too. It will be great fun."

"Oh, do," she said, "and let me watch you; I only do little daubs to remind me of the things I like best."

"So do I," he said; "that's why I want to sketch this morning."

"Had you fixed on your subject?"

"I have; let's go to the garden of the Savoy Hotel—I'm staying there. I want to make a little sketch of the white-columned arbour that hangs over the river; it's a mass of bougainvillæas, and it looks exquisite against the blue sky, with the yellow sand behind."

"Oh, but *I* could never do that; besides, I should be too shy even to try before you—but let's go."

"Why should you be shy with me?" he said. "I wish you wouldn't." His grey-green eyes expressed the genuineness of his wish so simply that Stella smiled and said:

"But if I can't help it!"

"I had hoped you weren't shy with me," he said, "we have so many interests in common; but it's always the same thing, my wandering life has left its mark. I make all women feel ill at ease."

"Oh, I didn't mean that I felt altogether shy with you but your work is so strong, so unusual that I couldn't do even my poor best if you were watching."

"Then I won't watch," he said, "but if you like I'll take it for granted that you are only a beginner, and after you've finished I'll tell you what I think is wrong. Will you allow me to constitute myself your teacher?"

"Of course I will—how awfully kind of you!—and I'll try my best not to be nervous."

"If you only knew how little you need be nervous . . . you would laugh at your folly." He had at least gained one step, that if he pleased her as a master she might develop a desire for future lessons.

"Do you mind if I step in here a moment?" she said. "I left a necklace of mummy-beads to be re-strung; I bought it here, and the thread broke, they're . . ." as she spoke they stepped inside a curios shop laid out like a bazaar with almost every conceivable Egyptian form of curio.

The native produced the necklace: it was made of the finest and smallest blue mummy-beads Michael had ever seen.

Stella took it from the man and slipped it round her neck. Against her white muslin dress it looked fresh and delightful, and Michael Ireton showed his approval of the effect produced.

Then they looked round the various things for a little time, and Stella could not help admiring the delicate way in which Michael handled the tiniest objects. His big hands were pleasing both in their form and in the texture of their skin, and were expressive of a far more artistic temperament than his dominating personality suggested.

It gratified the girl to find that nice things about him kept on developing with their quickly growing intimacy. He was at the moment handling a terra-cotta head of a figurine . . . an exquisite thing and singularly pure in type for its period. It might have been unearthed in Sicily, or even Greece, for any trace there was in it of Egyptian art.

"How adorable!" Stella cried. Michael Ireton was holding it between the first finger and thumb of his left hand while he shaded it from the glaring light with his right so as to see its outline more perfectly.

"Just look at it! Isn't her profile beautiful?"

"And the soft, feminine expression! The Greeks knew all there was to know about beauty, didn't they?"

"Almost," Michael Ireton said; "very little would be new to them."

Stella turned to the curio-dealer. "How much is this little head?" The man had watched their expressions of admiration and the look of desire to possess the terra-cotta in the girl's eloquent eyes; so he put an absurd value on it.

Stella laid it down carefully in its box on its bed of cotton wool. "I will give you"—she mentioned about the twentieth part of what he had asked—"and not one piastre more."

"You insult me, madam," he said. "It is an antique, it is Greek, pure Greek."

"I know it is an antique, but I also know what broken terra-cotta figures of that size are worth. . . . If it were *whole* it would be worth what you ask."

"Not a head like that, madam; . . . the gentleman he knows very well that it is Greek, not Egyptian; it is beautiful; you must pay for beauty, madam." He looked at her companion.

Stella repeated her price as she lifted up the head once more. . . . "Will you take it?"

The man quietly took the head from her, "No, madam, for I would not insult the artist who made it two thousand years ago." He laid it back on the cotton wool.

"Very well," Stella said, speaking very rapidly in Arabic, "keep it, but *you* probably paid the Arab who found it about the twentieth part of what I'm offering you for it, and I have been a good customer."

She walked out of the shop with Michael Ireton at her side. "The wretch saw we wanted it," she said, "so up went his price."

"Did you want it?" he said.

"Yes, frightfully." she said laughingly.

"Let me go back and get it, please do."

"No, you mustn't . . . I couldn't let you! It wasn't the price, that really didn't matter . . . he thought we were ignorant tourists—did you see his change of expression when I spoke to him in a torrent of Arabic?"

"But I do wish you'd let me get it, some horrid vulgarian will buy it, and just think how the poor thing will hate being touched by ignorant hands."

Before she could answer him, a hand was laid on her arm from behind. She turned quickly; it was the curio-dealer:

"Madam," he said, "I could not take your price for it, I have only *one* price; but will you allow me to give it to you? . . . Please accept it."

He held out the box in which the terra-cotta head was carefully packed in white cotton wool; there was no lid on the box, and the little face, so classically proud and yet so seductively feminine, looked up at her.

Stella held out her hand—she could not refuse it. "Thank you very much," she said; "I will indeed accept it: you are very kind."

"The pleasure is mine, madam," he made a profound salaam, "for you will return to my shop."

When the man was out of sight Stella and her companion behaved like two happy children over their treasure; they looked at it from every point of view.

"You really found it," she said, "it ought to be yours . . ." her eyes met his; "but I can't give it up. Let's hurry on to the garden or invent stories about her . . . did you ever see anything quite so lovely?" She held out the box impulsively for him to take another look.

"Yes, I have," he said, and as he spoke he thought how far more beautiful the living woman was, and he longed to tell her so, but wisdom forbade it, so he added:

"But I'm most awfully glad you've got it."

"The man has given it to us," she said, "because he does not wish to offend good customers: mother bought one or two valuable Arab things from him when I got these beads."

They had entered the grounds of the Savoy Hotel, and he was guiding her to the arbour he wanted her to sit in . . . he wished to see her surrounded by the brilliant masses of hanging flowers, he longed, to see her without her hat on! He wondered how he was going to manage it.

When they reached the spot Stella was in an ecstasy of delight; the greenness and coolness, the mass of brilliant flowers, made it, "too good to be true."

"The atmosphere of this particular spot strikes me as

very Roman—this white-pillared pergola-arbour hanging over the water, and the luxury of the vegetation covering the steep banks—we might be sitting in one of the famous villas on the Bay of Naples in classic times."

"Yes, it's simply glorious. Listen! that's dancing! do you hear that dull drum . . . drumming and that thud . . . thud?" They listened.

"Some Sudanese is dancing on the deck of a Nile boat."

"It's curiously seductive music," he said, "it grows and grows on one."

"I know," Stella said; "I often wonder how they contrive to get so much . . ." she paused, "so much passion into it; you only hear a dull thud, thudding, and an occasional tink, tink, tinking, and yet it's full of Eastern passion."

"To an extraordinary degree," he added; "it's very strange."

They had seated themselves in the arbour and were preparing to begin their painting. Michael had taken care to place himself where he could get a perfect view of Stella, whose background he had quickly selected. Suddenly she said, "I think I will take off my hat; the breeze here will keep away the flies, and it's such a treat to be in the fresh air without one's hat." She laid her white topee on the seat beside her and passed her fingers through her hair to raise it.

Then for a time they worked diligently. Stella had selected the point of the arbour most distant from them—it made a beautiful piece of composition; she had asked his advice before commencing upon it, and he had approved her choice. Their talk was principally about their work and upon the subject of art, but occasionally it drifted into more personal topics. Yet, there was never the right opportunity for Stella to mention Vernon's name, nor was there any reason why she should tell him of her engagement. They had so many subjects in common of abstract interest to engross their sympathies that the more practical facts of life did not enter into their conversation. Michael Ireton felt that, almost a stranger to her as he was, reckoning their intimacy by the number of times they had met, there was nothing any one could tell him about her which would add one iota to his real knowledge of her. Her mind was like a river of clear crystal to him, a river in which he had found all the beautiful things he had been longing to find in human companionship since he was a boy.

When an hour and a half had passed and tella at last put down her brush with a sigh, Michael closed his sketch-

book quickly and rose to his feet. "May I look?" he said, coming to her side.

She handed him her block, and waited for his verdict nervously.

"I'm not going to flatter you," he said, looking down into her quickly-answering gaze, "because we're going to be friends, and your work's too good to spoil by flattery. You don't want that, do you?"

"Flattery? Oh, no!" she said. "Thank you for knowing that I don't."

"There's nothing to thank me for," he said. "It's the truth . . . it's far from being 'school-girlish,' as you called it, and you know it?"

"I don't," Stella said humbly. "To me it's awful . . . it's . . ."

"It isn't awful," he said quickly; "but it's full of faults, and you've got some tricks that must be corrected.

He sat down beside her. "Now look here." He spoke in the most matter-of-fact way, while he spared her no criticisms. With hungry ears Stella took in every word he had to say, and asked him many questions, which proved to him that she was no longer afraid of him, or in the least shy.

When he had finished the lesson she said, "Now may I see *yours*?"

"I didn't do the pergola after all," he said a little nervously. "I only did a bit of the river with these fishing-boats." He opened his sketch-book and held it out for her. There was so little work in the hurried sketch, that she looked up at him in surprise.

"I *was* idle, wasn't I?" he exclaimed. As he spoke a leaf of the book, the one before the leaf he had used for the sketch of the boats, fell down, for Stella had pulled the book a little nearer to her, and it had escaped his thumb. As a perfect likeness of herself met her eyes she uttered a cry of surprise, and a vivid blush dyed her face, for it was an exquisite likeness, just as she had been sitting in the arbour surrounded by the magenta flowers of the bougainvillæa. It was the charm he had put into the expression of her eyes and mouth which made her feel embarrassed.

As she looked at it in silence, suddenly she knew that she must tell him of her engagement to Vernon.

"Will you forgive me?" he begged. "I have wanted to paint you ever since the first time I saw you at the opera in Cairo. An artist is a persistent animal when he has an end to achieve."

Stella blushed again, for she knew that he had known

that night that she had heard the cruel words of his companions in the Arab restaurant; she recalled the look of sympathy in his eyes.

He spoke so impersonally, and had so well conveyed to the girl that his sketch of her had only been made from an artist's standpoint, that she felt greatly relieved, yet slightly annoyed. Perhaps to tell him of Vernon was no longer necessary.

"You were perfectly welcome to do it," she said a little coldly, "but why didn't you ask me? It is extremely good."

"Because you would have been self-conscious . . . and that would have destroyed everything. It was your expression I wanted to catch, the expression I noticed when you were listening to the music that night: you had the same expression while you worked."

Stella looked at it again: a feeling of joy leapt in her to know that she was so lovely, for she realised that the portrait was exactly like her. "Mother would like so much to see it," she said. "Will you show it to her?"

"I'd be delighted to. Am I forgiven?" He asked the words persuasively.

"Yes, quite," she said; "and thank you so much for my lesson." She had risen to her feet. "I must get home now; how the morning has flown!"

"When will the next lesson be?" he asked boldly. "You should try some sunset or early morning effects."

"Perhaps we could manage to-morrow evening. If Nicolas is better we were thinking of going to Thebes in the morning."

He did not ask if he might come too, for something warned him that if he did the girl would be troubled to know how to answer him. The sketch he had made of her had suddenly raised up a barrier between them, which by diplomacy must be broken down, so he determined to gain his permission from Nicolas to go with them to Thebes.

When they arrived at the gangway of the *Isis* he handed his ketch-book to her. "If you care to show it to your mother," he said, "please take it; I will call for it this evening some time; I won't want it until the morning."

The next moment he had left her standing alone with his sketch-book in one hand and the little box containing the head of the Greek Venus in the other. When she crossed the gangway, one of the Sudanese boys commenced brushing the dust off her clothes with the usual long-handled ostrich-feather broom. In doing so he very nearly knocked the box out of Stella's hands.

She turned upon him impatiently. "If you had broken

that curio I think I'd have killed you," she said with such vehemence that the next moment she was ashamed of her outburst of temper, and also angered at the sudden realisation of the value she placed upon the little Greek head of a nameless woman!

The Sudanese did not understand; he was accustomed to far stronger expressions of wrath at his stupidity, but it was the first time the gentle daughter of the house had shown the slightest trace of bad temper.

CHAPTER XII

MICHAEL IRETON did not see Stella when he called the same evening for his sketch-book, but Nicolas, who had almost recovered from his slight attack of "the sun," greeted him with charming hospitality, and introduced him to his mother. Mr. Lekejian had left Luxor the day before with Girgis Boutros: his presence was needed in Cairo. Mrs. Lekejian had heard her son and daughter speaking of Michael Ireton; they had told her how much his company had added to their enjoyment of the day spent in the Valley of the Tombs of the Kings, and Stella had been perfectly frank about the painting-lesson he had given her in the morning, and, so when he presented himself on board the *Isis*, Mrs. Lekejian gave him one of her genial Irish smiles, as she said: "I have seen your picture of my daughter; we all think it is extremely good, if a little *too* flattering."

"I'm glad you like it," he said; "I will do a larger sketch from it for you, if you would care to have it?"

"Will you really?" Her bright eyes smiled their gratitude. "How very kind of you! Her father will be delighted—you've caught her expression wonderfully." Mrs. Lekejian noticed that the man's eyes were looking round the deck drawing-room, as though they were trying to find the original of the portrait. "My daughter is writing her weekly letter to her old school-mistress in London," she said; "she was a second mother to her for many years, and Stella is devoted to her."

Stella had intentionally absented herself from the deck drawing-room, as she could not help feeling a little uncertain about their growing intimacy. The little voice which can never be silenced had told her all the afternoon that it would be self-deception on her part to assume an ignorance of the man's very evident admiration for herself—and would Vernon like her to see much more of him? Her letter to Miss MacNaughtan was scrappy and distrait, for

over and over again her ear caught the sound of Michael Ireton's voice, and Mrs. Lekejian was evidently finding him good company, for many times Stella heard her infectious laughter ringing out like a girl's. In spite of her determination, she could not help seeing his well-shaped, powerful hands holding the little terra-cotta head of the Tanagra figure between two fingers, or feeling his masterful presence standing over her, as he had stood in the morning while he criticised her sketch. At last, angry with herself and annoyed with the Fates for having taken Vernon away from her so soon after their re-union, she put away her writing things and went to bed. From her bed in the state-room, she could hear the strange night noises of the East, and see from her window the wonderful stars in the heavens, and she could *not* hear the voices on the deck drawing-room. But she did not sleep until long after Michael Ireton's hearty voice had called out "Good-night, then I'll call round in the morning and see what you're going to do. If you don't want to go out until the cool of the day I will give Miss Lekejian another lesson if she likes—she's going to look upon me in the light of her master."

"Thank you," Nicolas said. "We don't care for her wandering about this place alone, and mother's not much of a hand at sight-seeing; it's very good of you."

"Not at all; it's most awfully kind of you to take pity on my loneliness."

When Michael Ireton was out of hearing, Mrs. Lekejian slipped her hand through her son's arm: "Let's take a little walk, dear. What a nice fellow, and how interesting!"

"Chance acquaintances are often the pleasantest. I got into conversation with him in the hotel the other day." He paused, and then added, "He must be all right, for we exchanged cards yesterday, and he belongs to two good clubs, and Professor Eritep's going to have him in his camp for a few weeks. He's awfully keen about Egyptology."

"He's a mining engineer, isn't he?"

"Yes, but I fancy he's made a good deal of money in rubber. He's taking a long rest for such a young man. He says he had a bad attack of fever, the first he's ever had, and was advised to take a year's holiday."

"He's a splendid type—what a physique!"

"A fine physique, with fine brains at the back of it; there's something very simple and primitive about him, isn't there?"

"Yes, that's his charm; he strikes one as a man who has not much in common with modern society . . . is he married?"

"I shouldn't think so; he's not mentioned his wife if he is."

Mrs. Lekejian was silent while they took their last turn forward on the deck. She was thinking that, although he seemed to be a good many years her daughter's senior, he was much more the type of man she had imagined Stella would have chosen to marry than Vernon Thorpe; but she had to admit to herself that one does not meet a Michael Ireton every day, that he was individual; so of course Stella could have had no such personality as his for her girlish ideal: she felt that Michael Ireton might have been a dangerous rival . . . she gave a sigh.

"What's that for, mother dear?" Nicolas said.

"Oh! I don't quite know, my son," she caressed his hand affectionately. "I was only thinking."

"Thinking about what?"

"About Stella."

It was Nicolas' turn to remain silent.

"I think Mr. Ireton's the sort of man who would have understood 'things' better! He has a wider conception of life."

Nicolas stooped and kissed his mother; it was their parting for the night. "Your children are very perverse, little mother—perverse and foolish?"

She knew what her son alluded to. She pressed his cheek close to her own. "You've fought the fight splendidly, dear."

"I am absolutely fire-proof now, so I've something to be thankful for." There was a forced gaiety in his voice. "No more burnt fingers for me! I'm going to stick to work—there's nothing like it."

A little sadness showed through his mother's smile as she said, "For some years anyhow, dear; and you've always got me."

"For ever," Nicolas said; "unless I can find a duplicate of you . . . if I could, you'd have a daughter-in-law at once."

"I don't think you could find another '*me*,' dear, for I am now what your father has made me. I was a silly scatterbrained thing when he married me, you can't imagine *how* scatterbrained."

"You darling," he said; "you must have been lovely. Good-night."

CHAPTER XIII

MICHAEL IRETON rose next morning with an appetite for life which kept him singing snatches of odd native songs while he dressed, and thinking thoughts that made his big being tingle with an almost boyish delight.

He had never been in love before, and he was now as wholeheartedly under the influence of the malady or Elixir as any youth in his twenties. He had found the woman he had been looking for all his life, and he was going to have her. Something told him that if he was given a sporting chance he could *make* her love *im*—the very manner in which she drew her eyes away from his sometimes, and the way she avoided his at others, helped him in his belief; at the same time he recognised that, although there were passion and tragedy in her wonderful eyes, she was sensitive and highly strung to an unusual degree, that, in spite of her Eastern ancestry on her father's side, her nature was exquisitely pure and virginal.

Her lasting affection would only be won through the intellect, not by the senses. But how hard it would be to see her and be with her in the exuberant life of the East, surrounded by that light and atmosphere which sets a man's blood tingling and makes his imagination sail out to shoreless seas, without betraying his feelings for her! As he walked down to the little landing-stage where the *Isis* was moored, he made all sorts of determinations to treat her with platonic naturalness and so win her friendship.

Stella waved her hand to him as she saw him across the gangway; her action expressed so much girlish pleasure at the anticipation of another of Luxor's glorious days that he felt it easy to answer her in the same light-hearted way. "Are you coming to sketch," he said, "or going to Thebes?"

She held up her block. "Sketch. Nicolas mustn't go out until it's cooler."

When Michael Ireton was beside her he said, "How do you do?" He was not going to lose the opportunity of holding her hand in his if it was only for one moment.

"Where would you like to go?" he questioned, while a glorious feeling of thankfulness to the gods surged through his being. It was strange the way this slim, almost fragile girl had the power to affect him. To maintain his self-control he had to fight as fiercely with his own nature as he had ever fought against rebellious natives in primitive lands; but he did it so magnificently that Stella

comforted herself with the assurance that her fears of the day before had been groundless.

"Do you know what I think would be delightful?" she said.

"Tell me, and if it can be done we'll do it. Isn't life glorious in a land like this?"

"How does it appeal to you," she said in mock seriousness of tone, "to take a boat and idle on the water for an hour or two; we could get some nice effects on the river. If Nicolas had been well enough to go, we might have taken our lunch and ridden through Thebes and right on to a wonderful road which winds up to those rocks on the top of the hills until you reach the heights of the Sahara." She pointed to the Theban hills which lie behind the plain where the great city stood.

"That sounds fascinating," he said. He knew that her words implied that she could not go for so long a time with him unaccompanied by her brother.

"I have a childish longing," Stella said, "to sit quite alone on the Sahara . . ." She paused. "I want to hear its centuries of 'silence' rolling up like a mighty ocean—it must be awe inspiring! Isn't it strange to think that the great African desert lies on the top of these hills?

"Do you like being alone?" he said. "I've lived so much alone that I can't do without solitude: I never know what loneliness is except in cities."

"That's just what I feel: being lonely does not consist in being alone, it's being with people who bore you, who don't understand your interests, isn't it?"

"Yes," he said, "but that's because *you're* intellectually minded: ordinary folk would rather talk to anybody than nobody."

"Is it? I only know that the loneliest feelings I have ever endured have been in crowds and at parties." She sighed.

"I am always 'bored to tears' at parties," he said lightly; "I avoid them like the plague, while being alone I often find too exciting—do you know what I mean?"

"That's exactly what I feel, only I never actually realised it before. . . ." She smiled; her whole being was expressive of complete mental sympathy.

They were walking together to where they were to take one of the gay little pleasure-boats which flit across the Nile like butterflies of tropical colouring . . . only the present enjoyment of the day was in their minds, and the consciousness that nothing they enjoyed or noticed would be overlooked or unappreciated by either of them. The man was keenly conscious of all that their enjoyment

signified, the girl was not. Nor was her conscience disturbed by any thought of disloyalty to Vernon.

When they were comfortably seated in the boat and were settling themselves to paint, Stella drew off her gloves and took out her paint-box from its leather bag.

"What a curious ring that is!" he said as he watched her movements: "I noticed it yesterday. Has it a history?" Having no precious stones in it, the importance attached to the ring, although it was on the third finger of her left hand, had not dawned on him.

Stella's heart stood still; she paused for courage; then she said slowly: "It is my engagement ring!"

In the acute silence that followed Stella knew, though her eyes were fixed on her paint-box, that the man in front of her was struggling for recovery from the blow her words had dealt him. She had not meant to tell him so abruptly, even though she had assured herself that his feelings for her were only platonic.

She heard a long-drawn sigh, it had escaped from the depths of his soul: it expressed all she had feared. She could not be deceived.

"Your *engagement* ring!" he said. "So you are going to be married? you love some one else?"

"Yes," Stella said, "you met my fiancé that evening in Luxor Temple." She let her eyes meet Michael's—she was compelled to. The look of surprise she saw in them angered her, for they had told her that in his mind now she was either very different from what he had thought her, or that intellectually she could have nothing in common with Vernon—that, from the highest standpoint, she did *not* love him.

"He had to return to Cairo on duty," she said, a little hotly; "he is a soldier, and his week's leave, which we had waited for so long and had planned to spend at Luxor, was spoilt by the illness of his commanding officer: he had to return after he had only been in Luxor one evening."

Stella had spoken quickly and with an uncontrollable nervousness in her voice.

"How very disappointing! What were you thinking of sketching? Yes, that's a good piece of composition. Let's do that."

Stella had indicated the little scene she had hurriedly decided to paint. How thankful she was that while they worked there could be silence, for the man's casual voice hurt her more than any blame could have done, and yet, if she chose to deny her own conscience, she could justify herself by saying that she had only met him three

times ; that they were practically strangers ; that she had up till now had no opportunity of telling him of her engagement to Vernon. But her womanhood told her that it was a lie. Her real self, the self that the man in front of her understood so well, knew perfectly well that, on that evening in the Arab restaurant when their eyes had met for the second time, she had had her warning.

After twenty minutes had passed, the longest twenty minutes Stella ever recollected, Michael Ireton broke the silence by saying, in a voice over which he had at last a perfect mastery—he had half a sheet of note-paper in his hand, which he had taken out of his pocket—"I came across this when I was reading last night ; I thought it would amuse you, so I copied it out." He held it out to her. "It is a Ptolemaic school-boy's letter, written about two thousand years ago."

Stella read it aloud : "It was good of you to send me presents on the 12th, the day you sailed. Send me a lyre, I implore you. If you don't, I won't eat, I won't drink. There now. I pray for your good health."

"How deliciously human !"

She looked up with laughter-lit eyes : it happened to be one of her most adorable moments, it was her expression—the one he loved best. Such a fierce desire came to Michael Ireton to take her face in his two hands and kiss it, that he said abruptly, "Let us go home ; that's to say, if you don't mind."

His tone, almost cross in its abruptness, made her hand him back the paper a little nervously. "Certainly, let's go back," she said shyly ; "boys haven't changed much, have they ?"

"Human nature never changes," he said, "only customs." The true meaning of his words was conveyed by his tone.

In a very few moments the boatman had pulled them to the point from which they had embarked and they were walking silently back to the *Isis*. When they reached the landing-stage Michael Ireton left her with an abrupt "good-bye." A hard anger had suddenly possessed him which would not allow him to behave with a studied indifference to the fact that he now knew that she was engaged ; a fierce anger at his own folly, that he should have allowed himself to walk blind-foldedly into a trap—for centainly it was a trap—kept him silent.

Love had set its trap with a callous cruelty which by Michael Ireton was wholly undeserved, for he had never flouted Love nor had he scorned it ; neither had he dishonoured it : he had instead reverenced it by refusing to put a false god in its place, calling it by the name of

Love. And now, when all his reserve forces had been let loose, now when his finest passions were ready to worship and enjoy his realised ideal of womanhood, Love had struck him a deadly blow ; Love had trapped him only to laugh him to scorn.

CHAPTER XIV

THE next morning when Stella was dressing her boy Yehla brought a note to her state-room door. She thought it was probably from Nicolas, as he was in the habit of sending her notes in the morning if there had been any development in the arrangements for the day which she had not heard the night before, so she told him to hold it while she finished tying her neck-tie. When she took it the handwriting made her start : she had only seen it once, in the Ptolemaic school-boy's letter—it was Michael Ireton's. She opened it with a beating heart. What could it be about ? Something with reference to her engagement, she felt sure. But it was not :

"DEAR MISS LEKEJIAN,

"Will you forgive my apparent rudeness yesterday morning sufficiently to allow me to join your party *this* morning ? As an excuse for any future lapses from conventional politeness please remember my long absences from civilisation and be charitable to your apologetic savage.

"Yours sincerely,

"MICHAEL IRETON."

When Stella had finished reading the note and was absently wondering what she was to do, her boy said : "Khadim (servant) waits an answer, *sitt*."

"Oh ! does he ?" Sella said. It would be delightful to have his companionship all day at Thebes, and how could she say "No," without arousing Nicolas's suspicions. And what reasons had she for assuming that the man cared for her ?—it was sheer vanity on her part ; and when her thoughts turned to Vernon she said : "He's enjoying himself in Cairo, his letters are all about dances and fun." She took up her letter-block and scribbled a few words which sent Michael Ireton's weather-glass of happiness flying up when he read them.

"DEAR MR. IRETON,

"Yes, do come, I should be so disappointed if you didn't. I'm afraid I prefer savages to civilised humbugs. At least you know what they want, and don't want.

"Yours sincerely,

"HADASSAH LEKEJIAN."

If Michael Ireton had fallen in love with Stella Lekejian when he was twenty instead of thirty-six he would in all probability have kissed the paper her note was written upon; instead of which he gave a packet of expensive cigarettes to his weary-looking bedroom-boy and made up his mind to enjoy the pleasures the day would bring forth without grousing about things that could not be helped.

The day proved delightful. More than once Stella congratulated herself upon her wisdom in having allowed him to come with them, for he made himself so amusing, and contrived to set her mind comfortably at rest upon the point that now, since he knew that she was engaged to Vernon Thorpe, he was capable of carrying on their friendship on a purely platonic and intellectual footing. Nicolas rarely left them alone for many minutes together, and the archæological interest of Thebes was so absorbing that it allowed very little time for talking about personal or abstract matters. But the day was by no means a negative one, for it only bound the man's feet more securely in the trap which merciless Love had set for him. He saw more and more convincingly how correct he had been in his estimation of the girl's character. There was the assurance of complete affinity in their intellectual interests and pleasures. To Stella it proved that very human-and-intellectual elements can be found so perfectly blended in mankind as to make up an almost ideal companion. His humour, always expressed in the most serious and apparently spontaneous manner, appealed keenly to her sense of the ridiculous; and, as he loved to make her laugh, because laughter brought into play the most winning touches in her mobile face, he exerted himself to amuse her in a way she never for one moment suspected.

For the rest of that golden week in Luxor, Michael Ireton contrived to spend many hours of each day, and of each star-lit night, at Stella's side.

With really superb control he had never allowed the girl to feel that in seeing him she was being disloyal to her lover, even to the extent of permitting a man for whom she herself had no feelings other than those of friendship, but who loved her, to be constantly by her side. Each night when he tore himself away from the seat in the bows of the *Isis* where they had talked and thought, and studied the mythology of ancient Egypt, Michael Ireton knew that he was laying up for himself a mountain of suffering, the climbing of which he dared not contemplate. Yet so sufficient for the day was the joy thereof, that he was willing to accept the debt he had to pay for his brief cup of happiness, or rather pleasure, for there was

infinite sadness in it. Even when they parted, he managed to hide from Stella his real feelings; for he spoke lightheartedly of their probable meeting later on in Cairo; he was going in the interval to Professor Eritep's camp at Abydos, where a site of prehistoric interest was being excavated.

On their last evening together they lighted upon a topic of conversation which was to bear fruit in a curious way in Stella's future life. They were referring to a conversation Stella had had with a Coptic girl of about fifteen years of age who had placed herself near them when they were eating their lunch in the ruins of the only building of a domestic nature left standing in Thebes to-day. Stella had asked the girl if she could read and she had answered proudly that she could. Stella then asked her what the little blue cross meant that was tattooed on her wrist; she knew its significance, but she wished to find out if the girl did. She explained that it was put there when she was a little child to show that she was a Christian. Stella asked her if she knew *why* a cross was a token of Christianity.

The girl shook her heard: "No, *sitt*."

"Do you not know anything about the story of the Cross and Who died upon it?"

"No, *sitt*," and the girl shook her head gravely.

Michael Ireton had made a quick sketch of the girl, who was a typical Copt, with tragic eyes and an aquiline nose. When they were looking over his sketch-book the subject of the child's general ignorance and total indifference to the meaning of the cross which she so glibly said attested her right to be termed a Christian, that Stella said, "Please don't laugh if I tell you that I have been nursing a great ambition, ever since I returned to Egypt, about this very subject."

"May I hear it?"

"You'll think it foolish, perhaps, and unpractical, but the desire to carry it out always comes up again and again."

She was silent for a moment.

"I never give up a thing I want to do, without a big fight. Have you tried . . . ?"

"It's very difficult: I want to work in a practical way . . ." It sounds so grand to say that I want to work for the elevation of the Coptic women in Egypt, but that's what I do mean. I don't mean by giving big sums of money—father does that—but by teaching them myself the simplest things about . . . well . . . about . . . about the self-respect of womanhood, and the virtue of cleanliness and . . ." she looked at him for response, and in his eyes she found all that she needed.

"Then why *don't* you do it?" he said, "who could do it better with your . . . with your intimate knowledge of their language, and also with what I should think is extremely necessary—an intimacy with their most sacred superstitions—you would be able to do magnificent work." He looked pleased with the idea. "Make a fight for it," he said; "don't let really surmountable difficulties be magnified into insurmountable ones."

For a few moments both the man's mind and the girl's were lost in thought, but they were travelling on the same road.

"Would your *father* allow you to do it?"

Stella knew by the expression of his eyes and voice that he really meant, "Would your lover?"

"Yes, in time I think he *would*," she said, "when I am a little older; but it is all out of the question now—I feel that it is quite hopeless."

"Your marriage?" He forced the words out of himself in a way which made the colour mount to Stella's cheeks.

"Yes," she said, "Vernon hates my having the slightest connection with anything he calls 'native'."

In the deep silence Michael Ireton heard the girl's quicker breathing.

"Of course as a soldier's wife you would not have much opportunity." He rose from his seat beside her and leaned over the bows of the boat: something stronger than his own self-control would be required, if he sat by her side any longer, to prevent him from taking her in his arms; the only things to do was to leave her. Stella sat on her comfortable seat surrounded by soft cushions, but they seemed made of thorns—she felt that the air was quickened with a new force, a force which was almost unbearable. The feeling was purely psychic, for not one word had been said to produce it, and in Michael Ireton's voice anything but tenderness was expressed. At the moment he was clinging to every civilised quality that primitive man has adopted to help him to hide his strongest passions. He knew that the girl would scorn him for ever if be behaved dishonourably to her trust in him as a chosen friend, and that he would consider himself a cad if he did; so, in a voice which had recovered its habitual friendly tone, he said: "I hate good-byes, so I'm only going to say good-night. I'm off." He held out his hand; Stella put hers limply in his. An awful sense of numbness had come over her with his words.

"Good-bye," she said, "and thank you a thousand times for all my lessons; I shall miss them."

"It's I who have to thank you," he said with measured politeness, "it's been a delightful week." His voice was so coldly conventional that Stella felt her numbness increasing. Then suddenly he raised her hand to his lips and with a tender fierceness pressed a farewell kiss on the beautiful fingers. "Good-bye, dear little girl; good-bye, and God bless you."

The next moment he walked swiftly away to say good-bye to her mother and Nicolas: and Stella, after pressing her hands to her face for one wild moment of turbulent emotion, dropped them determinedly and set herself down before a copy of "The Sketch." She made a brave attempt to read it and not imagine foolish things about the man who, in spite of his kindness to her, only thought of her as a "little girl."

A quarter of an hour later, as Michael Ireton stepped across the gangway of the *Isis*, she saw him turn and look up at the spot where she was sitting; she rose impulsively from her seat, and leaning over the edge of the boat, she called out to him, "*Mâ-as-salâmah*" (good-bye).

"No, *not* 'good-bye,'" he said, "for I shall see you in Cairo; only '*lêltak sâ-îdah*'" (good-night).

. . . . . .

From his camp about a week later he sent her one of the many letters he had written to her, letters written to satisfy his ever-increasing desire to speak to her, or hold some sort of communication with her. Each one he wrote, even while he was penning it, he knew he would not send, yet in a measure it helped to relieve his pent-up feelings. The one he eventually sent ran thus:

"My dear Little Friend,

"I am trying my hardest to think of your happiness and enjoyment from a purely unselfish standpoint, for which, if you only knew it, I deserve some praise. What could be more delightful than your life at present? Doing things you love with the person you love best in this world, in this wonderful climate and in this wonderful land—you are to be envied: As for myself, you have given me so much pleasure that it would be ungrateful of me to complain if you have also quite innocently given me much pain.

"La Vie est vaine.
Un peu d'amour,
Un peu de haine.
Et puis: Bon jour!

"La Vie est brêve.
Un peu d'espoir,
Un peu de rêve.
Et puis: Bon soir!"

"The work here is 'thrilling.' I know, with your love for prehistoric and early dynastic things, how you would enjoy it.

"Always your most sincere friend,

"MICHAEL IRETON.

"PROFESSOR ERITEP'S CAMP, ABYDOS."

CHAPTER XV

AFTER a two weeks' absence Vernon was able to rejoin the Lekejians, who had moved their dahabeah to Assouan. Stella selected Assouan, for there they would be able to go for long rides in the desert and get better sailing than at Luxor. She was conscious that she would be happier with her lover at Assouan, playing tennis in the splendid gardens of the Cataract Hotel, and amusing themselves with a sailing-boat on the wide reaches of the river which lie between Assouan and Komombo, than doing the ancient buildings with him in Thebes and Luxor that she had done with Michael Ireton : she was glad to leave Luxor.

The monuments of Egypt affected Stella strangely : she gloried in them intellectually, but they made her profoundly miserable. She had never been so unhappy as at the temple of Abu Simbel, which they had visited in the interval between Luxor and Assouan. It was a new sort of unhappiness, the result of the sudden realisation that she herself, as a personality, did not exist ; that nothing mattered, or ever had mattered in so fleeting a thing as the life-time of a human being ; this brought with it the sensation that she no longer had any passion for Vernon, that she could never again love him as she had once loved him ; yet even this did not seem to matter enough to cause her any pain. It was as though the age and cynicism of Egypt had withered her emotions.

But it was, above all, the feeling of self-extinction which unnerved and exhausted her physically. In the temples and tombs she was under the dominion of Age, she was possessed by the Power of the Unseen ; for the time being humanity mattered to her no more than the bats and scorpions and spiders which housed themselves in the subterranean halls of the Pharaohs.

At Abu Simbel she had risen at dawn, with Nicolas, to see the sun enter the vast hall of the temple and move slowly up the Osiris-guarded aisle to the high altar. She saw it enter as the God Harmachis (the rising sun) has entered that indestructible sanctuary, hewn out of the rock-battlements of the Nile, for more than three thousand years. When Nicolas saw the effect the ancient buildings

were having upon his sister's nerves he was only too glad to fall in with her plan for returning to Assouan.

After a few days at Assouan Stella found that her own existence was once more, to herself at least, a thing of very conscious and vital importance, that Vernon's letters were still capable of stirring her pulses and making her long for his presence. At Abu Simbel she had not wanted Vernon ; he would have wanted her to respond to his presence as a lover, even while the great Harmachis was crossing the threshold of his house. She was relieved he was not there to feel bored instead of elated by the Majesty and Dominion and Power of this most strangely romantic of all temples on the Nile.

At Assouan, with its modern tennis-courts and gay flower-gardens, riding by Vernon's side along the same desert track which led the ancients to the Land of Gold—that camel-path to Ethiopia from whence came ivory and frankincense and myrrh for the greater glorification of the gods of Thebes, she could think pleasurable thoughts of Abu Simbel ; of its flowering acacia trees, which dipped their lower branches into the waters of the Nile, while their upper foliage screened the façade of the building from the curious eyes of the toilers on the river. At Assouan, her state of mind was so normal that she could tell Vernon all about the great temples and the tombs of the kings without dwelling on the thought that they had caused her fear and depression.

It was chiefly to please herself that she lingered over the mystery and romance of the buildings, for she wished to give him the chance of entering into her feelings and æsthetic enjoyments. If she banished these things from her life when she was with him, their sympathies would eventually become one-sided ; besides, there was the subtler feeling of guilt she wished to atone for.

Vernon admired the various buildings, because their size and age were amazing enough to make him amazed without mental effort. Their grandeur was obvious, their indestructibility awesome, but their history, or the meaning of their decorations, did not interest him one scrap. When Stella talked about them, he would have yawned himself to sleep if he had not been in love with her.

But their ride to the ancient granite quarries at Assouan really delighted him. He liked to see the marks of the chisel fresh upon unfinished statues and gods which had been commissioned by living kings some four thousand years ago ; and he asked for nothing more intellectual than to ride in the desert or sail on the wide stretches of the Nile in white-winged boats, as gaily painted as the arches

of a rainbow. He was as happy as a child. And for one week Stella, too, was completely happy. To a true woman it is so delightful to be adored and considered beautiful that Stella basked in the warm sunshine of love and devotion.

At Assouan they had dined once and lunched once in the huge hotel. On both occasions Stella had met people whom she had known in England, and they had been delightful to her: they had not yet been affected by the prejudices of Cairo. They begged her to come and see them in Cairo when they both returned from their trips up the Nile, and they were enthusiastic over the excursions they made with her father and mother on their house-boat.

The Lekejians had taken them to Shellal, to see the great barrage. Mr. Lekejian knew one of the chief engineers, who showed them over the immense concern, and explained its history and workings. The day at the barrage was a day which might well have filled any Englishman's heart with pride. The temples and the tombs of Egypt were built for the glorification of the Pharaohs, out of the life-blood of the people; the barrage at Assouan has been built to give food to the poor—in Egypt water means food. It is a comforting fact for an Englishman to remember, as he stands on that amazing structure, that once again in Egypt the hand of the builder has raised a monument of almost superhuman conception, a monument which can take its place with the buildings of the Pharaohs; and he can reflect that it is under English rule that the first Monument to Humanity has been raised in a land where the English rule is vilified. It has been left for the English to bestow the unspeakable blessing of water alike upon the poor and the rich. The barrage is a very Temple of Justice.

Vernon was immensely impressed; he would have liked to spend some days in inspecting it, but his "leave" passed all too quickly, and he had to rejoin his regiment.

As the Lekejians wished to visit the temples of Denderah and Komombo and Abydos on their way back to Cairo, Vernon got there a fortnight before Stella, and on the very eve of their arrival he was ordered to go with his regiment to Helouan, for a fortnight's manœuvres. At Helouan he saw a good deal of society, for there are health-baths at Helouan which attract invalids. During these weeks he was initiated still further into some of the mysteries and peculiarities of Cairene society, and he shrank from the knowledge, forced upon him, that Hadassah Lekejian and Stella Adair were two very different people. He grew to wish that the girl who had ridden by his side at Assouan over

the desert sands and under the clear skies *was* the Stella Adair he had known in London . . . he would have given ten years of his life to be able to say truthfully to himself that "for the opinion of the English he did not care a damn!" It was no use his trying to affect anything like a fellow-feeling for even the most Europeanised of Orientals, for he could not, and he sincerely hoped that they, in their turn, felt no such fellow-feeling for him.

He was happily confident, however, that Stella would be only too glad to shake the dust of Cairo for ever off her feet when she was married to him. In London are not the doors in the most exclusive society open to Turks and Jews and Syrians, to the peoples of all races, if they are wealthy enough to entertain lavishly? Yet in his wholly British soul he wished his beloved Stella had not suddenly been changed into the beautiful Syrian Hadassah whom the nice Englishmen in Cairo talked about with so much pity. He would have given worlds to have changed her back again into Stella Adair. The idea that she was conferring an honour upon him by marrying him had unconsciously faded away; it had even occurred to him once or twice to wonder if Mrs. Lekejian had not very naturally encouraged Stella in her love for himself, for Mrs. Lekejian, being an Irishwoman, would naturally like to see her only daughter married to a European, and she was to be forgiven if she had kept Vernon in ignorance of Stella's true position in Cairo.

There was only *one* solution, he would take Stella away from Cairo as soon as he could. In England she could have her parents to visit her as often as she pleased, but never again would he permit her to live with them in the East.

CHAPTER XVI

STELLA did not see Vernon after her return to Cairo for almost a week: he was still at Helouan. To-night there was to be a reception at the British Agency, to which the Lekejian family had determined to go, and Stella knew that she would see him there. Stella had been induced to sing at a café chantant got up for charity, and the British Agent's wife had then shewn her much sympathetic kindness.

Lady Minton had been charmed with the girl's voice and personality, and had insisted upon being introduced to her. Realising Stella's isolated position when she discovered that she was a Syrian, in the kindest way she begged Stella and her mother to come and see her, and expressed

the hope that they might enjoy many musical afternoons together. As Stella's nature was intensely responsive to true sympathy, she determined to break through her rule of refusing all social functions of a public kind (she was never invited to private ones) and go to Lady Minton's official reception. Lady Minton's kindness to the girl had not altered the residents' attitude towards the Lekejians; they merely said, "It is a great pity if Lady Minton is going to start doing this sort of thing; it has been tried many times and has been found impossible. Leaving it off will hurt the girl's feeling much more than if she had never been noticed at all." So Stella went to the reception, not only to show Lady Minton that she appreciated her kindness, but to get over the inevitable ordeal of meeting Vernon amongst English people who liked to pretend that she did not exist.

Stella was exquisitely dressed, and, as she passed one long mirror after another in the crowded rooms at the Agency, she could not help knowing that the vision of herself she saw in them was pleasing. It sustained her self-esteem, and she comforted herself with the thought that she was well turned-out and looking her very best. Excitement had brought a delicate colour to her usually pale cheeks, and her soft eyes seemed larger and more brilliant than ever.

After shaking hands with her hostess, who was naturally too occupied to say more than a few words to her, she found herself by her mother's side again, watching the entrance of fresh arrivals. She knew that she would probably stay there all through the evening, and that she would scarcely speak half-a-dozen words to any one outside of her own party. She could see nothing of Vernon. Soon her heart gave a little bound, and she felt the blood leave her cheeks, for he had entered the room with the very people who had told the man who had bowed to her from the British Agent's box at the opera something which had prevented him making any further attempt to renew their friendship. Stella saw Vernon talking quite intimately to a pretty girl of the fair, conventional English type, the type of woman of whom conventional men approve because they know exactly what to expect of them. The unaccustomed in women may be amusing in a mistress; it is annoying in a wife.

It would be impossible for Vernon to avoid seeing Stella after he had shaken hands with Lady Minton, and as his companion's mother was one of the leaders of Cairene society—who refused to receive "natives" of any kind in her house—Stella was a little excited to know what he

would do. As they drew near her eyes met the blue eyes of the girl he was talking to. She was looking at Stella with very obvious admiration, so she may have said something about Stella, for her mother's diamond-crested lorgnettes went up, and Stella felt the cold scrutiny of two worldly eyes passing over her. It was her scrutiny of Stella which made Vernon suddenly notice her. A deep flush dyed his face, and for a moment he stopped hesitatingly, but it was only for a moment; the next he had passed on with a bow and an embarrassed smile. His hostess was speaking to him, and telling him in a clear voice that "some Levantines are *quite* beautiful when they are young, but that, like all natives, they quickly degenerate."

At that moment Stella did not feel like the Biblical Esther of old, who hid her nationality from her lord in order to save her people. Rage seized her, and she could have torn in pieces every Englishwoman in the room. The hideous cruelty of it, the hideous vulgarity of it, the hideous prejudice of it! How could she blame Vernon? She felt that she had been through the scene many many times before, she felt it was inevitable that things should have happened just as they had happened. The band was playing a popular waltz, and the big room was becoming crowded; faces she knew by sight were passing before her; and all the while she was talking to her brother Nicolas as though in a dream. She had no idea how long she had been standing by her mother's side, mechanically talking about things that did not matter, about things she could not remember the moment after they were said—it might have been for hours—when Vernon came up to her. He seemed a little nervous, and explained that he had come just as soon as he could get away from his party.

As he spoke to her a flood of devotion suddenly leapt in him: to see her standing by her parents' side, her young face frozen to a dreadful coldness, filled him with anger against his own race; his eyes were so full of passion that hers melted a little as they looked into them, but the hand she held out to him was the hand of a stranger. She could not decide what she had expected him to do—that he should leave his hostess and dash impetuously towards her and claim her as his own—or what? She did not know; she only felt that he had not done as *she* would have done if their position had been reversed. *Should* he have said, when the cruel lorgnettes went up, "That is the girl I am engaged to. May I introduce her to you?" She did not know; she only knew that that little moment of hesitation, that conventional bow, and that embarrassed smile, had placed worlds and worlds

between them. She *hoped* that she would not allow him to kiss her when they were alone, she hoped that she would never again feel that delicious sense of she knew not what when his arms were round her, she hoped that she would never tolerate an Englishman's love again. He asked her to come for a walk through the rooms and go out on the terrace. Her mother smiled to her to go: anything was better than to see her child neglected and overlooked, while every one else in the room was gay and sociable. At such a gathering there was, of course, no introducing, and in Cairo, where the residents knew each other intimately, there was little need of it. Stella's father was the centre of a group of men who were eagerly discussing the Asiut election and politics generally. There was a Turkish Pasha amongst them, and the most influential lawyer in Cairo.

Stella left her brother to look after her mother, and went off with her lover, but not one word came to her lips; she walked the whole length of the room in complete silence. Her heart was too full of bitterness to speak naturally of trivial things. She longed to cry out, to tell him she was miserable, that she was miserable because she still loved him even though he had failed her, that she was sick of the whole world. Vernon did not attempt to speak until they were seated under a flowering sunt tree, whose luscious scent sweetened the soft night air. Bright lanterns like sumptuous tropical flowers, were gently swaying from the trees in the breeze, and in the distance an Arab lover was pouring out his heart to the moon.

Vernon's arm stole round Stella's waist and his lips were pressed to her white throat. Stella was trembling, and, although she was not responsive, she did not resist; already her senses were being drugged by the magic of his caresses.

"Dearest," he said, "do let's get married and leave this beastly place. I'll take you back to England, where you will be courted and adored once more. English people are hateful in the East."

She let him kiss her lips, for he had turned her face to his, but she said, "Don't, Vernon, please don't."

"But why?" he said. "No one can see us here. The tree completely hides us."

"Yes, I am your lover when there is no one who can see us . . .?"

"Oh! Stella . . ." he stammered confusedly, "you don't want me to kiss you in *public*, do you?"

She was silent.

"You're miserable, darling, out here, where everything is wrong. Why don't you go back to Miss MacNaughtan?

—and I'll change into another regiment and come home and marry you."

"This *is* my *home*," she said slowly. She had drawn her face farther from his.

"*I* never feel that it is."

"But you must."

"Why should I? I like to think of you as Stella Adair, the most beautiful and popular girl in a set of decent English people at home . . . All this sort of thing is upside down. . . . It's like a bad dream; it's hateful!"

"This is how things are," she said; "the other was a dream."

"But it needn't be: your mother would let you go home to-morrow; I know she would . . . she's a dear; she understands."

"And you would have me go 'home,' as you call it?"

"Why not? It would only be returning to the people who brought you up, to the people who understand you, the people for whom you were educated."

He kissed her again, and pressed her soft cheek closely to his own, but Stella roused herself to resist the seduction of his passion, to throw off the physical lassitude which his near presence always produced in her. In a voice stifled with emotion she said: "You are wrong; they are not my people; that is just the mistake we have both made. . . . My people are here! Girgis Boutros is one of them. I am what you English call a Levantine, I came here to-night so that you should know it."

Vernon withdrew his caressing hand. "But you don't care for him. He doesn't count, or any of his people."

"I admire him," she said, "and I should despise myself if I married you and left my people—surely you would despise me if I did it?"

"Dearest, you don't love me! What has changed you?"

Her answer was to lift his hand to her lips and kiss it very tenderly. She had hoped that her words would bring forth the protest that he would really love her less if she despised her people, or that he would marry her in Cairo to-morrow if she liked, and show the stiff-necked English that her people were his people, and that his people were hers.

But he had no such thought . . . he was obsessed with the one idea that if she loved him she would leave her detestable relations for his sake, and live in a country where being a Syrian meant no more to the general public, if the woman was rich and charming, than being a Turk or a Jew or a Greek. So he said, with a self-aggrieved air:

"Go back to England and wait for me, dearest; leave this beastly place—you would if you really cared for me."

"Never!" she said passionately. Her heart was beating wildly: she believed that she was rejecting the one thing that made life sweet to her.

"Darling, why won't you?"

"Perhaps if I tell you you won't understand; but please try to: it is because I should hate *you* if I went, if I was not strong enough to resist . . ." she pushed away his hands . . . meaning his physical attraction . . . her voice broke, "I should despise you if you did not hate me for going." As she spoke she knew that she was losing a portion of the ideal of him that she had created . . . she was conscious that one day she might lose all.

"No, I don't understand," he said; "you would despise *me* if you loved me well enough to do as I ask you to! You look at things from such a strange point of view."

"Not very strange, dearest. Can't you see how I should grow to hate you if my love for you made me a traitor to my own people, because you were ashamed to own that you loved a Syrian,—if you were afraid to face the music?"

Vernon was amazed at her intensity. "Who said I was afraid? What have I done? This sort of thing has got on your nerves."

"Do you wonder if it has?" she asked passionately: "Do you wonder if I hate myself for loving a man who belongs to the race of people who despise my father—my father who is worth a hundred prejudiced Englishmen—a man who scorns me in Cairo because his fellow-countrymen do not think any one not British is fit to speak to? . . . It is cruel," she said, "cruel and abominable. I hate myself for loving you, but I can't help it."

"Don't darling!" he said in a soothing voice.

"Oh! don't touch me," she cried. . . . "When you caress me I have no will-power, no individuality, no self-respect, and . . . I must resist, for to-night I know that you share the feelings of the English in Cairo. Something tells me that if we had never met in England you would never have loved me here . . . you would never have asked me to marry you?"

"Why do you say that? . . . I came to you as soon as I could. I had dined with these people: I had to be civil."

Stella gave a pitiful laugh. "You did not tell the lady you were with that you were engaged to me?"

"There was no occasion to."

"There was the opportunity! She made a remark about me; I heard it. Wouldn't it have been the natural thing to have told her then if you had not been ashamed?"

"Stella, this is awful . . . nothing has been right since I've been in Egypt . . . you blame me for all the wrongs the English have done to your people. Forget about it, do, dear."

"How can I forget?" she said. "Certainly not until I know my true position with you. . . . Are we to be openly engaged? Are you going to acknowledge me to your friends? . . . Are you going to accept my relations? . . . Or am I to be kissed behind the sunt trees and ignored in the drawing-rooms?"

"You're awfully cruel: you've changed completely. Are you so anxious for our engagement to be made public?"

"Yes, if you wish me to remain engaged to you in private!"

"What do you mean!"

"I mean," she said, "that if I did what I ought to do I should break off my engagement with you unless you agree to all I wish."

"Why? . . . For what reason? . . . I can scarcely believe it is you talking. . . . Stella, dearest, why on earth should you break with me? What do you wish me to do?"

"It would be fairer to you, and I suppose I ought to marry my cousin, Girgis Boutros."

"Good Lord, Stella! . . . What for?"

"Because I could help him in his work for the people. Because he would ask me to stay with my people and not forsake them . . . he would spend his great wealth on educating and raising the position of the Christians in Egypt."

"But why should you be made the sacrifice?"

"Because he loves me, and surely I have been born and educated for some reason . . . for some purpose other than to be an object of pity to the English. It must have been that I was to help him to carry on his work. . . . Heavens!" she said, with a hopeless sigh. . . "if only I could . . ." she stopped.

"If only you could what?"

"Forget myself. . . . If only I could forget that you exist, if only I had never known your love."

"You'll forget me all right," he said bitterly. "Girgis is very wealthy!"

"How cruel!"

"Well, I think it's you who are being cruel; you're chucking me for a richer man."

"For one who does not despise me; for one who does not ask me to forsake my people; for one who would be proud

to tell every one in Cairo to-morrow that I am his promised wife."

"And who said I wouldn't?"

"Would you? Will you introduce me to-night as your fiancée?"

"Of course, darling, if you wish it; but to whom?"

"To any one."

"I don't know people intimately here. . . . They are all the merest acquaintances; they don't even know I'm engaged: it would seem rather odd."

His arm stole round her because her face had softened, and she had not resisted the caressing shoulder as he leaned against her. As a woman she was so attractive that he could not resist her. It seemed impossible that any community of cultivated people could treat her as a social outcast, yet he had only to take her back to the drawing-room to realise that such was the case, and Stella insisted upon their going back. She wished to return, because she found herself becoming weaker and weaker under the magic of hands and the passion of lips, and she knew that neither her heart nor her pride were satisfied, and she was determined that her self-respect and pride should master her physical weakness. As she rose to her feet, she held out her hands imploringly. Vernon took them eagerly in his.

"Dearest," she said, "we need never speak of all this again: we need never mind what people think if only you will accept my people as your people. . . ." She paused. "As a soldier's wife, of course, I should naturally go with you to the uttermost ends of the earth. . . . But I will never go anywhere for the sake of getting away from the people I belong to."

"And you will not marry Girgis Boutros?"

"I will never marry him . . . unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"Unless you fail me."

"In what way?"

"By scorning my people, by doing nothing to help me to make their position less undignified, by keeping your eyes shut to the injustice of the English."

Steps close at hand prevented Vernon from answering her, and the next moment Nicolas and Michael Ireton were standing beside them. Nicolas hesitated and was turning away when he saw who it was they had interrupted, but Stella begged him to come back. "Nicolas, don't go! . . . Vernon has to return to the friends he came with."

The look of pleasure and something deeper which had

lit up Michael Ireton's face when he saw Stella was not lost upon Vernon, whose mind was instantly filled with jealousy. He did not want to leave her with this man who, he knew, appealed to the intellectual side of her nature so strongly . . . nor did he particularly wish to take her back to the reception room, where he might have to face the difficulty of meeting his hostess and introducing Stella. He knew that Mrs. Bostock would not be nice to the girl, the more so because Stella was much better dressed than her own daughter, whom Vernon imagined, though he was not vain, to have been designedly thrown in his way lately. Vernon had only been three weeks in Cairo, and had already seen the same set of people a good many times at different social functions. He liked the girl with her pink skin and blue eyes; her love of out-door games and sport appealed to him; but he had no desire to be drawn into a flirtation with her. As Stella had as much as given him his dismissal he was upon the point of leaving them, when she said to him in a persuasive voice: "Vernon, *will* you come to-morrow morning and see some of the old Coptic churches? Mr. Ireton would like to join us."

Vernon detested sight-seeing, but he was too jealous of the man to let Stella go about alone with him, so he accepted the invitation. "I hope you don't mind vermin," he said to Michael Ireton. "Some people I met out at dinner last night told me that these old churches are alive with all sorts of insects: one girl had hysterics when she got home and found the worst of all things on her blouse, within an inch of her hair."

"I do mind them very much," Michael said; "but clothes will burn and I will wash, and these old churches are unique, both in point of architecture and real beauty. I *must* see them; it is worse for ladies. What will you do, Miss Lekejian?"

"I'll put on things that will wash when I get home . . . my maid will examine them first, for washing doesn't kill the *worst* kind—indeed, they often come home with the washing."

"Ye gods," Vernon said, "how horrible! Where is one safe?"

"Never, if you go in public conveyances or rub shoulders with the people in the bazaars."

"But I thought Mohammedans were clean; they wash before praying?"

"Not the women."

"And the Copts?"

"They are no better. . . ."

"Thank God for England," Vernon said; "I'd rather

have it's rain and grey skies than the filth and sunshine of the East."

He turned to go.

"Then you'll call for me at nine o'clock to-morrow morning?" Stella asked. "It will be on your way . . . it gets too hot later on."

As he left them Michael Ireton said, "Oriental things don't appeal to him very much, do they? He's of too British a turn of mind."

Nicolas knew that Vernon had brains of the kind which could absorb certain subjects if they interested him, but he doubted very much if he had a mind which "thought" for itself upon any subject whatsoever.

For a while they walked about the grounds, and Michael Ireton told them what he had been doing since they had parted in Luxor. He was enchanted with Abydos, and told Stella a great deal about the expectations of the excavating party there. Apart from the romance of Osiris's tomb, the great temple of Abydos is unlike any other building in Egypt. Its very name is suggestive of its peculiar charm and delicate beauty.

Stella said that she envied the professor's wife, who lived with her husband in his camp and helped him in his work there. Michael Ireton looked at Nicolas, who understood the remark his eyes conveyed, that if she longed to be the wife of a man whose whole existence was given over to archæological research, how could she be satisfied with Vernon, whose real interests in life were polo and golf?

"Would you be contented to live her life?" he said. "You would have to do without all luxuries: camp life at Abydos is very severe."

"I believe that Stella could do without them," Nicolas said, "better than she could do without intellectual interests and intelligent companionship. She loves pretty clothes and pretty surroundings, but I think half her pretty frocks are worn to please me."

Stella thanked him with her eyes. "These pretty things help to make my rather stupid life more exciting," she said . . . "but they really mean nothing: if I could go off to-morrow into the desert with Nicolas . . . or with any one who loved it as Nicolas does, I would leave them all behind me gladly."

"I believe you would," Michael Ireton said. "Our evenings used to be delightful . . . such talks . . . such arguments . . . such theories, all relating to things which had their place in the world thousands of years ago." As he spoke he caught Stella's glowing eyes, her ardent smile.

"I've a proposal to make to you." Michael Ireton had stopped suddenly, and strained his ear to listen: "Aren't you tired of all this?"—he pointed to the brightly lighted house and to the mass of moving figures. "I know a wealthy Arab who is giving a party on board his dahabeah to-night—it's lying just off Roda Island. If your sister had her wraps, we could get into a small boat and drift down the river and hear the music. The illuminations will be worth seeing."

Nicolas hesitated.

"I wouldn't ask you," he said, "if I didn't know it was going to be something very special. He's got a famous tenor on board, and there is to be a whole flotilla of boats, illuminated: he's entertaining a great swell from Persia—giving a series of entertainments, intellectual and otherwise, and I had the honour of being his guest last night. I had never experienced anything so delightful. The boat was a perfect fairyland of flowers and priceless embroideries, and there were story-tellers, and poets, who recited their parts in splendid costumes. The whole thing was classical."

Stella's eyes glowed. "I'd love to go," she said . . . "How did you get to know him?"

"I got to know him through a Frenchman who ignores the prejudices of Cairo and makes friends with all the most cultivated Arabs . . . he says he'd die of ennui out here if he depended on the society of Europeans; their parties are deadly affairs."

"Probably the Europeans think he's half a native because he isn't English," Stella said laughingly.

"Probably," Michael Ireton said, "but who cares! He took me there last night. I wish you could have been with me"—he addressed Nicolas—"it really was perfect."

"I wish I could," he said, "but with my mother and Stella to consider I can't . . . I tried it . . . when Stella was at school, but I found it difficult when I wanted to return their hospitality: I couldn't ask them to my home."

"I see," Michael Ireton said: yet he didn't see, for he could not understand why the Lekejians, who did not really know the English people in Cairo, thought it worth while to mind what they thought or said.

But he was reckoning without Stella's father, who would not allow Mussulmans to come to his house as intimates. He knew many of them, but he would not countenance the idea of permitting them to know his wife and daughter in their home life. He knew their opinion of women who lived in the free manner of Western women, as Stella did. He knew many Copts who lived almost like Mussulmans (apart from the fact that, being

nominally Christian, they were by their Church allowed only one wife), yet he considered them many degrees better in their "mental attitude" towards women than Mussulmans.

Stella and her mother visited very formally a few Mohammedan women of high rank, whose husbands were westernised enough to keep only one wife. Mr. Lekejian would not permit them to go to any harem where the husband had more. Stella thought it was rather foolish, as she knew quite well that their real reason for having only one wife was that they were not wealthy enough to give the wives the dowry they could claim by law if they were divorced because their husbands were tired of them, and their husbands would not care to support them in their harems for no purpose. It was easier, they said, to do as European men did—have only one wife in their homes, but as many mistresses outside as they chose, for they would expect no dowry when their little day was over. Like many excellent Christians, Mr. Lekejian tried to believe that the Egyptian Mussulman when he has only one wife is helping to raise the standard of Eastern morality, that he is doing it in the cause of morality, not of necessity, because only a few Egyptians can to-day afford to keep up the old customs of the harem.

So to Stella and her mother the inner life of the Mohammedan women was almost as much a sealed book as it was to the ordinary English resident.

When Nicolas returned with Stella's cloak he looked a little disturbed. "I think we ought not to go, dear," he said. "Father has gone home—he may have to leave for Asiut to-night—and mother is quite alone waiting for us."

"Why has father gone?"

"There has been a disturbance at Asiut. Amin Hamdulla (the Mohammedan) has been elected Mudir; some of the English have been badly knocked about by the Copts, who think they ought to have had their support at the election. Father has gone to his office to write a leader on the subject."

Stella looked grave. She was thinking of Girgis—how angry he would be. The Copt was really a first-class man; she was sorry for his defeat; at the same time, she did not believe that he could have filled the post of Mudir as well as a good Mohammedan.

She turned to Michael Ireton. "Please take me back to mother. We will go home. Nicolas, will *you* tell Vernon?"

They had almost reached the lighted rooms, and could hear the babble of voices, before either Michael Ireton or Stella spoke.

"I wonder if you realise how very interesting all this is," he said.

"All what?" she asked. . . . "That . . . do you mean?" She pointed her hand in scorn to the lighted rooms.

"Good heavens! no; I mean your life outside of all this . . . you are not going to *care* about this . . ." he took her hand. "You are so much above it, so much too good for it, dear child; promise me you will realise how little it matters and ignore it."

"How can I?" Her hand remained in his, the friendship of it helped her.

"Why can't you?" he asked. . . . "You don't really care about it; when you analyse it you know it's worthless."

"Vernon belongs to this life," she said; "I loved him before I knew anything about it."

"I wonder if you know what love means?" He looked into her eyes very earnestly.

"Why do you say that? I am not a child."

He smiled. "What has that to do with it?" he said. "Lots of people have lived to be seventy, and have been married twice, and never known what love meant."

She looked at him almost sadly. "How is one to know?" she said.

He did not answer—he was not listening; he was thinking of what he wished to tell her. "May I confess something about myself," he asked abruptly, "something I would like you to know?"

She nodded her head.

"Well, it is just this: when I first saw you, I knew that I could love you madly if I might let myself, and I would have let myself if you had not told me that you were engaged to Mr. Thorpe. I would have tried to make you love me madly too; but I am teaching myself to look upon you in a different way—I am taking up our friendship from a purely intellectual standpoint."

Stella's heart was beating so quickly she could scarcely speak, she managed to whisper: "I want your friendship."

"As I have accepted the fact that you can never be my wife, let me try to be your dearest friend, a friend who will never fail you."

"What can I say? I never thought . . ." she paused. "Oh! but you could never have married me; you think you would, but you wouldn't."

"I would have married you," he said roughly. "God knows I would marry you to-morrow if I might, and worship every inch of you, body and soul." He held her hand more closely in both of his.

"Hush!" she said. "Perhaps I ought not to let you say all this, but . . ." her voice broke. "I want your friendship, I want your . . ." she raised her eyes to his, "your understanding; but is it right?" She was thinking of Vernon's jealousy.

"Why not?" he said. "I know you are engaged, I know I am too late even to try to make you feel for me as I feel for you." He smiled. "How I should have loved to have tried, little girl! I have often dreamt that I have tried and succeeded: you have loved me in my dreams, Stella"—he spoke softly—"loved me as I know you are capable of loving; but I am man enough to act honourably if you will allow me to be your trusted friend."

She looked troubled. Vernon's love for her seemed like a boy's compared to this man's; she was glad they had almost crossed the threshold of the open window, so that she was spared the difficulty of answering him.

"Before we go in let me assure you that I will never allude to my feelings for you again. The subject of love is dead between us, it is going to be friendship in the future—and you can trust me? You never suspected?"

She evaded a direct denial. "The thought that you care for me is very dear to me; perhaps it shouldn't be, but I can't help it . . . I felt so despised . . . so rejected . . . such an alien."

"Good God!" he said, but checked himself: "I am glad you can feel for me like that; and remember that I am offering my friendship for always . . . if the day should ever come when you should need it you have only to send for me. . . . Remember that a man loves to serve the woman he adores, if it is only as a friend."

"Now say good-bye," she said, with smiling tearfulness, for she saw Nicolas coming with her mother towards her.

"Good-bye, Hadassah," he said. He had used her father's name for her, to show her that her people would have been his people. "Remember that this is to make no difference." With her hand in his he waited for her answer. . . . "No difference?" he repeated. "Promise me that."

"No difference," she said, and she thought that she spoke the truth, but it was not the truth, for her eyes could no longer look into his—that was the difference.

"I only wanted you to know," he said.

"And I understand *why* you wanted me to know," she said; "good-bye, and thank you. *Ma as-salâmah Ikattar Allâh Khêrak*," she repeated the words in Arabic.

He answered her in Arabic, "*Lêta'ṭ a'ṭâh es-salâm alêkum* (Good-night—peace be on you!)."

CHAPTER XVII

On reaching home two things troubled Stella's peace of mind and served to throw into the background all that Michael Ireton had said to her, although his words remained with her as a new solace for all her troubles.

The news that her father had suddenly left Cairo for Asiut caused her an anxiety which she dared not show her mother, for Girgis Boutros had often warned her that her father had many bitter enemies amongst the most discontented faction of the Copts, on account of the very English views he had expressed in his leading articles in the "El Watan"—the important Christian paper, written in Arabic, which supported the British policy in Egypt.

Amongst the few Copts who had thrown in their lot with the Moslem party who were the ringleaders of the most advanced anti-English sect, Mr. Lekejian was looked upon as a traitor to the cause of Egypt's liberation and self-government. He was detested by the Egyptian Christian and the Moslem fanatic. He had used his power in the press to suppress the seditious literature which filled the native papers, and had warned the rebellious Copts that in joining forces with the Moslem leaders of the revolutionary party they were putting halters round their own necks. He urged them to consider what the inevitable result would be if they assisted in making the English evacuate Egypt, a Moslem Government would not hesitate to rend in pieces the less powerful Christians who had assisted them in driving out their fellow-unbelievers from the land.

Girgis had often spoken to Stella of her father's fearless attitude towards the pan-Islamic body and how he had more than once felt anxious for his safety on the occasion of religious festivals in Cairo, when Islamic fanaticism is fanned to hysterial irresponsibility. Upon learning of the disturbances at Asiut her father had hurried off to the scene of action, for, besides owning a great deal of property in the town, which brought him in a heavy rent-roll, he was one of the governing body of the city hospital, and held various honorary posts in charitable institutions in the neighbourhood. Like many other wealthy Syrians, he had invested his money in landed property when it was of little value, before English rule had brought commercial safety and prosperity to Egypt. The land he had purchased in Cairo for almost a song was now of immense value. But it was not for mere personal reasons he

went to Asiut, but to do what he could to bring reason to the minds of the incensed Christians. The disturbances in Asiut were entirely Christian in character; the Mohammedans were only too well pleased to have successfully fanned the spirit of discontent among the Copts against the English Government.

Stella was more than anxious for her father's safety: added to her fears for her father, another difficulty had suddenly thrust itself upon her overstrained nerves—the evening post had brought a letter from Nancy Thorpe, offering herself for a few weeks' visit to the Lekejians. She had never been in Egypt, and as her brother Vernon was there, her aunt, with whom she lived, had consented to let her visit Stella if it was convenient for Mrs. Lekejian to have her. What was Stella to do? She was well aware that Vernon would very much prefer that his sister should never know the true position Stella and her relatives held in Cairo, and she had to confess to herself that she also would be glad if little Nancy never knew. She could not allow her to come to Cairo unless she understood exactly what she was coming to. Although she would have preferred that Nancy should not come, she also knew that she would be furious if Vernon expressed any objection to her coming. If he did object to Nancy's visit her own engagement to him must come to an end. At the very possibility of his objecting her spirit rose in revolt . . . he must not . . . he dare not! There flashed into her mind the picture of English Nancy, with her rose-leaf face and Saxon fairness, a glaring contrast to Girgis Boutros, with his granite features and his crisp hair black as the wigs of the Egyptian Pharaohs. Would Vernon allow his sister to be seen with a native? Would Girgis complicate her difficulties by ceasing to love herself and transferring his devotion to Nancy?

Mrs. Lekejian had seen Stella open Nancy's letter: the girl's expression puzzled her as she read it . . . she wondered what it contained. As a rule Stella handed over Nancy's letters for her to read; to-night her daughter folded the letter up and slowly replaced it in its envelope, saying as she did so, "Good-night, mother dearest; I think I shall go to bed . . . I'm so very tired."

"Good-night, my darling." Mrs. Lekejian kissed her daughter tenderly on both cheeks. She almost opened the subject of the evening's entertainment at the British Agency, but she refrained; Stella's expression forbade any confession of the sympathy she felt for her. Mrs. Lekejian knew that the party had tried her daughter's nerves almost to breaking point, though she had no idea Michael

Ireton had spoken of his love to her. Mrs. Lekejian belonged to the type of women, who understand men like Vernon Thorpe better than men like Michael Ireton. If she had lived in England all her life and had never been exposed to the prejudices and narrow-mindedness of men of Vernon's kind, she would have admired him ungrudgingly she would have found his nature perfectly in sympathy with her own . . . with Michael she would never have had the same amount of sympathy. The seriousness of his stronger character made her a little shy with him, whereas it was the very seriousness in his nature which gave Stella the feeling of rest in his presence, the feeling of security she so much needed. In many respects she was years older than her mother, whose simplicity of character made her extremely lovable, and gave her an air of youthfulness. When Mrs. Lekejian left the room, and Stella at last found herself alone, she opened Nancy's letter and re-read it slowly:

"My dearest Stella,

"The Littlejohns have invited me to go to Egypt with them at the end of January. May I spend a week with you before we start on our trip up the Nile, that is to say if you can conveniently have me? If you can't, please say so, and I will stay with you, if I may, when we return from Assouan. By the way, when will it get too hot for Assouan? And do tell me what sort of clothes I shall want for the Nile voyage. Oh, I forgot! I shan't have time to get your answer by post, so will you send me a telegram just to say 'yes or no.' I shall quite understand if you can't have me just now. Isn't it ripping for me, and won't it be lovely seeing you so soon! I am bursting with excitement. We have heard very little from Vernon lately—I suppose he thinks he's busy; he *will* be surprised! How useful he'll be at dances: I've got some ducky party frocks. I'm beginning to read up books about Egypt, but I can't make head or tail of the awful gods, and as for the cartouches. . . . I shall like the desert far better than the temples and museums, I'm sure.

"Now, good-bye, dear girl; some one is waiting to post this. I do hope you can have me:

"Yours in great glee,

"Nancy.

"P.S.—It's all been so sudden that I can't believe it's true."

Tears came into Stella's eyes as she folded up the letter. Gay and light-hearted Nancy who adored her, of what use would her dance-frocks be? She belonged to the very sort of people who, if they had come out to Egypt as strangers, would have classed Stella, as "Native," as an "Impossible Levantine!" She almost hated the girl for it, yet she felt sure that if she allowed Nancy to visit

her she would be loyal and true to her, and would refuse to know any of the English residents who had ignored herself and her people. In the morning she would have to tell Vernon what Nancy's letter contained. She wondered what he would say? . . . how he would look? Stella was determined that she would not put Nancy off with excuses, that she would not fall in with the idea she was so sure Vernon would express, of making some excuse to stop her coming, and getting married before the next Cairo season and going home; in this way Nancy and his people need never know the position Stella held in Cairo. Stella laughed bitterly to herself. "It's a merciful thing that Syrians are not coloured people, though they might well be, for the social stigma that is flung at them, or I might have a black baby, and that would give the secret away. . . ." There must be no secret: her people were as good as the Thorpes any day: intellectually she knew that they were their superiors.

It was not until long after the late night-noises had died down, the mysterious noises of an Oriental land, and stillness reigned over the city of a hundred minarets and over the desert tombs of the Caliphs, that Stella went to bed; she had sat by her window lost in a mirage of thought.

There also was the knowledge of Michael Ireton's confession that he loved her; it gave her an indescribable and delicious pleasure, for there is no tender-hearted woman living who does not derive comfort and satisfaction from the reflection that she has made a strong man love her—strong intellectually as well as physically. She wondered how she would have felt towards him if he had tried to make her love him madly, as he had said . . . how she would have felt towards him if she had never met Vernon? If only the two men could be made into one, what an ideal combination they would make!

The first mueddin had sounded before she fell asleep. She woke with a start, for in her dreams Nancy was in Cairo, and had come into the drawing-room when Michael Ireton's arms were round her and Michael Ireton's lips were pressed against her own. A flame of shame burned in Stella's being: she was revolting to herself, and yet at the back of her mind lay a little unconscious regret that things were only as they had been the night before!

When her Coptic maid brought her early cup of tea there was a note on the tray in Michael Ireton's handwriting She opened it hurriedly. What could he have to say?

"DEAR HADASSAH,

"I saw your brother late last night, after he had taken you

home. I hear that you are anxious for your father's safety in Asiut, so I am going there this morning. I know I can't do much, but I will keep you informed of your father's safety, which may be of some comfort to you.

"We can do the Coptic churches together another time, and I believe Mr. Thorpe will be just as well pleased as I should be, under the same circumstances, if I am not there. God bless you, Hadassah, and don't forget that I am your friend for always,

"MICHAEL IRETON."

Michael had gone to Asiut because her father was there . . . here was kindness indeed! But if there was any trouble in Asiut, would her father be allowed to stay in the city? And if he was, would Michael not also be in danger? The feeling would be very strong against all foreigners, for as Asiut is almost completely a Coptic city, the Mohammedan element would be largely outbalanced. Besides, it would suit the Nationalist party very well to allow the Copts to treat the foreign Christians as insultingly as they pleased.

Stella did not know whether Michael's going relieved her mind, or had added one more anxiety to the many.

She slipped on her bedroom-gown and went to her mother's room. When her mother answered the gentle knock, she was little prepared to see her daughter's large eyes looking at her from a very pale face. "Come in, dearest," she said. "What news has the post brought you?" She saw Michael Ireton's letter in her daughter's hand.

"May I get into bed with you, mum dear, and I'll tell you?"

Mrs. Lekejian opened up the bed-clothes and made a place for her daughter by her side. Since the days when Stella had spent her long holidays with her mother, and had been allowed to get into bed with her in the mornings, she had never lain there. Stella felt once more like a little child; once more her mother was her comforter and protector.

"Mother," she said, after a moment's silence, "Mr. Ireton has gone to Asiut this morning."

Mrs. Lekejian looked at her daughter with inquiring eyes.

"He thought we might be worrying about father. He went on his account."

"How kind of him!" Something in Stella's eyes embarrassed her mother.

"He is the kindest thing I have ever known; there never was any one so kind . . ." she handed her mother Michael's note. Mrs. Lekejian read it.

"Stella!"

Their eyes met for one moment, then Stella's dropped. She could not speak to her mother of this man's love for her, for had he not said that she was to forget it, that he had conquered it, that he was from henceforth to be only her friend? He was going to Asiut in a spirit of friendship, not of love. . . .

"I have something else to say to you, mother. Nancy wants to pay us a visit—she is coming out to Egypt directly. She asks me to wire to her if you can take her. . . ."

There was a pause.

"Of course we can take her, dearest." Mrs. Lekejian's voice trembled a little.

"Mother," Stella said, forcing herself to speak—"if Vernon shouldn't want her to come?"

Mrs. Lekejian did not reply, and in the silence mother and daughter heard the quicker beating of each of their hearts.

"I must tell Vernon she wants to come. If he should object . . ." Stella's voice died away, she pulled the bed-clothes over her face. . . . "Oh, mother!"

The next moment Mrs. Lekejian's arms were round her, she was holding her child very closely to her. "My dearest," she said. "Oh, my dearest! I sometimes wish I had never been born. What have I done? what have I done?"

"Hush, mother, don't! It's no one's fault, it's something far beyond human blame." For a little time they held each other very closely. Arms of love were what Stella needed at the moment.

"We may be mistaken, darling. Perhaps Vernon will be glad that Nancy is coming; we mustn't blame him before we know."

"He may not, mum . . . but if he objects, he must remember that between him and my people there is no choice."

"Oh, Stella!" Mrs. Lekejian's eyes filled with tears. She did not blame her daughter, for she knew what her feelings must be towards a race of people with whom she had little in common, and she remembered how she herself had renounced her own people for her husband; but she did not know her daughter, she had not reckoned with the Irish pride that had descended to her through her own blood; she did not realise her unswerving allegiance to her own flesh and blood.

"I mean, mother, that if my people are not to be Vernon's . . . if he objects to Nancy entering Cairene society under your chaperonage from father's roof, I will never become his wife."

A cry of pity burst from her mother's lips. "But you love him, Stella! . . . Oh, my child! my child," Bewilderment and dismay filled her.

"I love him and *hate* him, mother!"

"Has he ever said anything, anything about . . . ?"

"He wishes me to go to England and wait there until he comes home . . . *then* he will marry me!"

"But could you not, dearest! . . . I can't bear to see you suffer. . . . He may be wise, he may be considering your happiness, not his own feelings."

A cry was torn from Stella's heart. She had risen to go to her own room, but she flung herself across her mother's bed in a passion of weeping. . . . "Don't, mother, don't tempt me, don't be like Vernon—I can't bear it; the half of me that he owns can't stand the temptation, but it's the lower half of me!" . . . The other half, which he doesn't know, and won't even try to understand, won't allow me to be a traitor to my people, to my father, to you, to Nicolas. It won't allow me to humble my head in the dust for the sake of his love. . . ." She stopped; her eyes sought her mother's. . . . "Oh! pray God, mother, that the other half won't win."

Her mother could not speak, for the thoughts that filled her mind must not be spoken, even to her own child. She had not lived in Cairo and mixed in the strange society of European-Orientals for twenty years without having learnt something of their true natures, but her love for her husband had never allowed her to utter one word of her real feeling towards them.

After her outburst of weeping Stella became perfectly self-possessed. "I am making a mountain out of nothing," she said; "please forget how stupid I've been. Vernon's coming for me at nine o'clock, so I must hurry."

"What are you going to do?"

"We *were* going to see some Coptic churches together."

"Why do you say you *were*? Are you not?"

"Because Mr. Ireton was coming too . . . in fact he and I had planned to do them together, and then I asked Vernon to come with us."

"He won't enjoy them, will he?"

"But I shall," Stella smiled. "It's no use allowing him to think that I'm always going to do only the things *he* likes, mother, is it?"

"Not a bit, dear, if you will enjoy it."

"I should not enjoy *not* doing them, because that would be doing just what I try so hard not to do."

"What is that, dear."

"Giving in to him on every point when he is there to

urge it . . . and persuading myself that I am going to be so strong-minded when I'm by myself."

"The old-fashioned woman always did give in, dear. . . . Do you think they were any the unhappier for it?"

"So did the harem woman, mother, because she was neglected if she didn't."

"My dearest!" Tears sprang, like summer rain, into Mrs. Lekejian's eyes.

Stella's arms went round her. "Mum, dear, I didn't mean anything . . . really, I didn't, only I want to stamp right out of my nature all the elements of the Eastern woman's attitude towards men, and I sometimes think that my love for Vernon is primitive and Eastern. . . . It has nothing to do with my intellectual nature . . . there are moments when I should like Vernon to take me away and shut me up in a castle and keep me all to himself, keep me from hearing or knowing anything about all the great and important subjects of the day. . . . I'd enjoy it, mother. . . . Are you ashamed of me?"

Mrs. Lekejian smiled as she thought to herself how every woman has longed to be a slave to some man's passion. But she only said: "It's a natural instinct, it will pass; it's nothing unusual."

Stella shook her head. . . . "It's more than that, mother. . . . It's stronger than that . . . it's the East and the West horribly muddled up in me."

CHAPTER XVIII

STELLA and Vernon were just starting off to see the Coptic churches in Babylon, which is the name of the portion of the native city of Cairo where the Coptic churches lie hidden away like the secret meeting-houses of the early Christians in Rome, when their exit was stopped by the appearance of their dignified servant, Joseph, who told Stella that a young dragoman had called and had asked to see her father; on hearing that he was not at home, he had asked if he could see her brother. When he was told that Nicolas also was not in the house he had entreated to be allowed to speak to the daughter of the house . . . his business being most urgent.

Stella turned to Vernon. "I had better see him for a moment. What is his name?" she asked Joseph.

"Mahmud Hamdi."

"That's the name of the young Arab who showed us over the pyramids about a year ago. I wonder what he wants? Do you mind coming into the library with me

while I see him ?" Vernon followed her into the library which was also Mr. Lekejian's private office. "I will see him in here," Stella said to Joseph. "Tell him I have only five minutes to spare."

At Joseph's bidding a superb young Arab stepped quietly into the room and salaamed profoundly. Vernon was amazed at the dignity of his bearing, and at the elegance with which he wore his rich dress. His was not the usual bizarre uniform of a dragoman—nothing could have been in better taste or more pleasing to the eye than his native outfit.

"You remember me, my lady ?" he said in English.

"Yes, I remember you . . . you are Mahmud Hamdi. . . . What do you wish to tell me ?"

Stella spoke coldly, and there was impatience in her voice: these fine young dragomen were vain creatures; it did not do to treat them graciously, although their manners suggested the most perfect breeding.

Mahmud smiled softly. His delicate teeth shone like jewels against his clearly-chiselled lips, which were childishly pink and smooth. "My lady, there is much trouble in my famil*ee*; I come to ask your father's advice."

"Why do you consult my father ?" Stella said. "He is a Christian."

"No matter, my lady, him very just man, him write to the papers and tell Lord Minton ?"

"What has happened ?" Stella said. "Please tell me quickly; I am going out; I have very little time."

"Yes, my lady, I will tell you very soon. . . . Your gen-le-man him wait a little, him very kind. . . . My father rich man, him own much land; him not want for anything."

"Yes, yes," Stella said. "I know all about your family."

"Very well, my lady, my big brother him in prison for stealing antiquities. It one big lie, my lady; my brother no need of any money, my father give him plenty, plenty, plenty!" Mahmud waved his hand to suggest the rolling ocean of wealth which his father distributed amongst his sons.

"Then why is he in prison ?"

"I will tell you, my lady . . . Mohammed Hassan very jealous of him, Mohammed him pay the courts £700 to put my brother in prison."

"And what do you want my father to do ?"

"My lady, if your father tell Lord Minton, him very just man; him give order to have case tried again in English courts."

"Oh," Stella said. "That's it: your brother was tried in a native court and was sentenced by a native judge: now you wish the case tried in the English courts: you believe in English justice?"

"Yes, my lady, because my brother him innocent; every one knows Mohammed Hassan bribed the jury; him very bad man."

Stella looked at Vernon. . . . "You have heard all this?" she said.

"Yes," Vernon said. . . . He didn't believe a word of what the man had said, because it was not in his nature to believe anything that an Oriental said, unquestioned. . . . Stella knew that the Arab was probably speaking the truth, because his father was a reputedly wealthy man, and his sons bore the character of being honest and trustworthy; but what interested her was the confession from the lips of this same young man who had talked to her so finely upon the subject of "Egypt for the Egyptians," the day he had acted as her guide to the pyramids, that the native courts were corrupt, and that he was now anxious to have his brother's case tried again in the British courts. It was typical of the ethics of the Nationalist party in Cairo.

"And you think the native courts are corrupt?"

"I know it, my lady: if your father tell Lord Minton, him try my brother's case in English courts."

Stella was silent for a moment.

Mohammed turned his attention to Vernon. "Mister . . . you not seen pyramids? I not seen you there. . . . To-night very fine moon: you bring young lady to see pyramids, I find most splendid camels; you enjoy very good excursion. I very fine dragoman: if you not want camels I take you very nice walk, no tourist peoples, all very quiet and nice for young lady and gen-le-man."

"No, thank you," Vernon said, "you stick to your business about your brother."

Stella smiled, for Vernon was speaking to the magnificently dressed Arab as though he was a street merchant selling fly-switches—whereas he was really the son of a wealthy landed proprietor.

"Well, Mahmud," Stella said thoughtfully, "if I ask my father to use his influence on your brother's behalf, will you promise me that when you are talking about Egypt for the Egyptians, you will remember, that you no longer want Egyptian judges in your courts. Will you tell all the tourists, when you speak about the injustice of the English people filling the posts in your Government which might be held by natives, that you have changed

your mind—that you by personal experience know that Egypt is not yet ready for self-government—tell them that you came to my father, who is a *Christian*, to ask him to help you to have your brother's case tried in the uncorrupt English courts ? "

"Oh, yes, my lady, certainly ! I will promise everything you wish."

Mahmud was eager to promise anything, for his talk of Egypt for the Egyptians had only been froth, as most of the fine talk of the young Egyptians in Cairo is. "My lady, I tell everybody English peoples the most just in the world . . . I tell everybody if English courts send a man to prison that man him guilty."

"Very well," Stella said, "I'll see what my father can do."

Mahmud salaamed respectfully. "My lady, I thank you." He turned to Vernon: "My gen-le-man, if you come to see pyramids you not forget Mahmud Hamdi. Good morning, my lady ; good morning, my gen-le-man."

"Good morning," Stella said, "and don't you forget that the native courts are corrupt."

When the Arab had left Vernon said, "Do you believe a word that beggar said ? Do you think this brother did steal the curios ? "

"No," Stella said thoughtfully. "I shouldn't think he did : they're very well off, though Mahmud will take a few piastres for a morning's work if you can't afford to give him any more or won't give it him. I should think that his story's true—the native courts are dreadfully corrupt. . . ." She turned to her lover smilingly : "That's one thing I think no one will deny—that the English courts are the best and straightest in the world."

"I'm glad we've one virtue in your eyes." Vernon had not forgotten their quarrel of the evening before.

"I think you're all virtues and prejudices ; the English are singularly free from big vices and the petty sins of corruption—perhaps your prejudice is only the self-righteousness of a naturally *un*corrupt nation."

When they arrived at the point at which they were to meet Michael Ireton, Stella said, "Mr. Ireton isn't coming with us ; I had a note from him this morning—he's gone to Asiut."

"Whatever for ? Isn't there some disturbance going on there ? I read rather a nasty account of it in the paper this morning ; I should think English people had better give Asiut a wide berth at present."

"My father had to go there last night. Mr. Ireton thought that mother and I would be anxious about him,

so he went off this morning. Besides, he wanted to see for himself what was going on: he's awfully interested in this Copt question, and indeed in almost everything connected with Egypt."

Vernon did not speak.

Stella understood why, although he had a very excellent excuse for not doing so, for they were passing through one of the narrowest and most crowded streets in the native town. . . . Scantily clothed men, carrying goat-skins full of water for sale, were barging into them with fearful yells, and at unexpected corners camels' heads appeared high above their own, their soft tread giving no warning of their near approach. White donkeys, bearing fat women enveloped in black, trotted along regardless of whether there was room for the market produce they carried in their wallets to crush its way through the crowd of loafing and hurrying people.

Vernon hated the whole thing; the smells and the flies and the noise. They far outweighed in his mind the exquisite beauty of the mosque domes, which looked as though they were made of delicate lace against the blue of the African sky; and if there were minarets overhead, from which the call to prayer had sounded five times a day for over five hundred years, he did not see them; if there was a feast of colour and a banquet of beauty in the old meshrebiya window-screens of the mediæval houses, it was all to him a filthy place, not fit for ladies to pass through. He wished to God that Stella didn't care for old things; it would have been so jolly out at the Ghezira Sports Club, or motoring by the banks of the Nile, where there was something green and clean to look at. The difficulty of walking and seeing that Stella was not molested occupied all his attention, while at the back of his mind there was the irritating thought that Michael Ireton had gone to Asiut to please Stella. When at last they reached the particular church Stella had chosen to see, they found that a service was going on. A dozen choir-boys were squatting on the floor at the feet of the priests. Their behaviour was so shocking that before Stella and Vernon had been in the church a minute one of the priests, who wore a white garment with a Coptic cross on his back, of bright scarlet, stooped down, and picking up a wooden clog which one of the boys had discarded, threw it angrily at the most unruly member.

A number of women, who were all very closely veiled and enveloped in black shawls, were sitting on the floor in a sort of pen which was hidden by the finest meshrebiya screens; they were nuns, and had evidently come in from the con-

vent which formed a part of the extraordinary building. Certainly Vernon had never been in any church the least like it before—it was far more pagan and mysterious than the open and spacious Mohammedan mosques, most of which he admired ungrudgingly. Everything about this Coptic Church jarred on him, the close atmosphere, the certainty of vermin, the irreverent attitude of the officiating priest. Stella was intensely interested, but she made a sign to Vernon that they would go; she saw that he was bored, and she did not wish to force her point. She had had her way and so, after they had walked hurriedly through the convent, where the black-swathed nuns were squatting on their bare kitchen floor, drinking coffee out of very small cups, she determined to let him off sight-seeing.

The Coptic retreat for women who had determined never to marry was altogether sordid and unemotional. As they descended the staircase a Coptic youth met them at the bottom of it and implored Stella to enter the lower church; it was much more open, and larger, and had been freely restored. . . . Vernon exclaimed: "Surely you've had enough for one morning! I can't stand that awful atmosphere any more: do come along."

The Coptic youth in European clothes implored her again; he saw a chance of improving his imperfect English and of relieving the monotony of the long and wearying service by gloating upon Stella's beauty.

When she refused and turned away, Vernon gave a deep sigh of relief.

Stella smiled. "You're glad that's over."

"Yes, rather. I hate these beastly smelly places. The mosques are lovely; if only there was anywhere to sit down in them, we could go into one and talk . . . but these dark churches hold all the smells and dirt that have ever got into them since the time of St. Mark. I say," he cried eagerly, "do let's go out to the pyramids, and get some of the clear air of the desert into our lungs."

Stella agreed willingly; it was on her mind that Nancy's visit had to be spoken about, and she thought that the desert would be a very good place to introduce the subject.

As soon as they could find an *arabeah* which looked clean enough to drive in, they dashed off at a break-neck pace to the point where the tram starts for the pyramids and the Mena House Hotel. It was not much after eleven o'clock when they found themselves seated in the desert just under the pyramids.

The sweet air after the close atmosphere of the city was so invigorating, that Vernon was soon in one

of his sunniest moods. He had no wish to talk, nor had Stella; they were absoluetly alone, for tourists never wander into this lower portion of the desert; but now and then little native Arcadian scenes would unfold themselves before their eyes with a simplicity and naturalness which was in keeping with the soul of the desert.

"I don't mind these desert people a bit," Vernon said; "*they're* all right. . . . I suppose they are Arabs?"

"Yes, Bedouin Arabs. The people in the villages round the pyramids pride themselves on the pureness of their Arab blood."

There was silence again. Vernon was thinking that he wouldn't mind in the least if all Stella's aunts and cousins were of pure Arab blood, if they were as simple and dignified as these quiet villagers.

Stella was saying to herself, "Now I must tell him about Nancy."

"Vernon," she said abruptly, "I had a letter from Nancy this morning."

"Hullo!" he said, "how is she? . . . Nancy would love this . . ." he indicated the desert . . . "wouldn't she? But Lord! how she'd hate those beastly churches. By the way, why did every man who came in carry a crutch?—they couldn't all be lame!"

Stella smiled. "They must not sit during service, and the services often last for hours; they carry crutches to rest upon while praying."

"How odd! They are so strict about some things and so slack about others!" He lapsed into silence again.

"Nancy says she is coming to Egypt; she will be in Cairo next Thursday."

Vernon sprang to a sitting position—he had been lying at full length on the sand. "Good Lord! Stella, do you mean it?"

"Yes, here's her letter." She handed it to him; her heart was beating very quickly. Vernon read it through without comment; for a few moments they remained silent.

"Well?" she said.

"Well?" Vernon said slowly. "I wish it needn't have been, but I suppose it can't be helped."

"You wish *what* needn't have been?"

"Nancy's coming to Cairo."

"Why?"

"You know why, dear; and what's more, you ish it too, you can't deny it."

"I don't wish it," Stella said emphatically, but she knew she was lying as she spoke. "You mean you're ashamed of me and my people?"

"Dearest, how can you say so?"

"Because it's true. . . . I've not wired to Nancy yet, but I must do so when I go back."

"What are you going to say?"

"That depends."

"Upon what?"

"Your wishes."

"Dearest," he said eagerly, "how nice of you! Of course I'd much rather she didn't come," he turned to the letter again . . . "but she's actually on her way out now, so whether she stays in Cairo or not she'll be in Egypt. . . ." He paused. . . . "What's to be done? Great Scot!"

"Oh! it's quite simple," Stella said. er words fell very slowly from her lips; they were like drops of ice.

"How is it quite simple?"

"I'll wire to her that we can't have her when she arrives; then I'll write to her and explain *everything*: if she chooses to come to us after her trip up the Nile it won't matter to you."

The tone of her words made her lover glance anxiously at her face. "Why won't it matter to me?" he said. "I don't wish Nancy to stay in Cairo either before or after her trip up the Nile."

"If she stays with me *after* she has heard all about our position in society in Cairo, she will not be coming as my future sister-in-law . . . it need not trouble you."

"Stella," . . . ernon clasped her hands in his, "Stella, what do you mean?"

"I mean just what I told you last night—that if my people can't be yours, yours can't be mine."

He held her hands more tightly. "But you will be mine . . . you promised you would . . . I hold you to it. . . . Let's be quits: I don't care if you accept my people or reject them—we love each other, that's enough."

She tried to withdraw her hands; her face was white and tense.

"You don't love me any more, you are tired of me . . . you make this an excuse."

Stella dropped her eyes. A curious revelation had come to her at the very moment that he was telling her that he would hold her to his promise—that his touch had ceased to thrill her, that not once during the whole morning while he had been with her had the old intoxicating flame of passion rushed through her veins and drugged her will-power. A terrible numbness came over her, she could not speak. Vernon instinctively felt some lessening of his power . . . the magnetic current had broken! And as

he felt it he hungered to kiss her back to subjection ; his vanity was bruised ; he looked round to see if any one was in sight before pressing his lips to hers. There was no one in sight ; he bent forward to draw her to him—he must make the flame ignite.

"You are mine," he said, "do you hear ?—mine only, and for ever. Stella, say you love me, say that only our love matters ! . . ."

With a composure she hated herself for feeling she allowed him to kiss her lips, to use his lover's privileges ; she was eager to feel responsive, for as yet she was scarcely conscious that she was not.

"Say you love me," he said ; "say it, darling ! I must hear it from your lips." There was a new note of anxiety in his voice—the lack of response in her lips had awakened it ; something made him feel less sure of her : it made him angry, and doubly keen to subjugate her once more. . . . It is a dangerous moment when a woman finds out for the first time that the man she has blindly adored has no longer the power to intoxicate her senses, that his kisses no longer act as narcotics . . .

She pushed him gently away. "How ever much I love you, it doesn't matter if you feel as you do about my people ; I shouldn't consider my promise binding."

"I'm awfully fond of your mother and father, and I'll pretend I love even Girgis and all your cousins, rather than give you up. Will that please you ? "

He had caught her hands again, and imprisoned them fiercely.

"What about Nancy coming ? "

"Let her come," he said hotly.

"Thank you, dear ; I will ask her ; I'm so sorry."

"Sorry. What for ? "

"That Nancy should have placed you in this awkward position."

He smiled. "There, darling, I knew you didn't want her to come—it was only your pride."

"I only mean that I'm sorry for you because you mind ; I don't, I'd rather she knew . . ." she paused. . . . "I think you're doing a very unwise thing."

"In what way ? "

"In persisting in continuing our engagement. You'd much better take your liberty : I'm young enough to recover from the shock." She smiled sweetly, to soften the bitterness of her words.

"Then I don't," he said ; "and what's more, you've got to promise that you'll never again mention the word liberty

or breaking off with me, if I do my utmost to please you in regard to your people. Promise," he said—he held her face in his two hands—"promise . . . say after me, 'I, Stella Adair, promise to marry you, Vernon Thorpe, at the soonest date possible, if you are as nice as you can be to my people.'"

Stella looked laughingly into his eyes—they were very boyish and blue—but as she looked the plain face, with its strongly marked lines, of Michael Ireton rose up before her, a curious coldness numbed her heart, a touch of pity entered into her feeling for Vernon . . . his old mastership was dead. . . . She paused and then said slowly, "I, Hadassah Lekejian—for that is how it must be—am willing to marry you: the old engagement with Stella Adair is a thing of the past; the new compact must be made with Hadassah Lekejian, the Syrian Hadassah Lekejian, the cousin of Girgis Boutros."

"All right," he said, "so be it, insert Hadassah Lekejian in the agreement and give me a kiss to seal it." Something of love's passion stirred Stella's senses as he renewed the compact. They were young, and the peace of the African desert enveloped them. For the time being her soul was lulled to rest: the animal content of the Bedouin women, in their trailing black garments, who kept ever coming and going across the yellow sand, seemed very enviable, while the stern outline of the pyramids, silhouetted against the turquoise sky, forced their "terror of age" upon her, and showed her the folly of her own unrest.

How could she be a slave to doubts and fears of human passions? She had imagined that Vernon would be the master of her desires for ever, that her great battle would always be to free herself from the obsession of his love, to act up to her own ideals, and not blindly obey him in all things. In the old days the selfish enjoyment of administering to his selfishness had lowered her in her own eyes. Now the bonds of love were loosening, another voice had dropped a diviner poison in her ears. A new and awful desire had come to her, to test her power over the stronger man's heart, to make the man who was "the master of his soul and the captain of his fate" love her madly! Was the sensual Levantine blood in her veins asserting its true power? The idea revolted her. She was angry with herself for having discovered a flaw in the ideal she had created, and enshrined in the outwardly perfect form of Vernon Thorpe. At that moment he looked an ideal lover, yet, the personality of Michael Ireton rose before her mental vision. She closed her mind upon it in anger;

she had not wished to see it, she had used no effort of memory to visualise it.

For the rest of their morning in the desert Stella was a perfect lover. Her sweetness of disposition at all times made her a delightful companion, and this morning the voice which could not be hushed urged her to do her utmost to please Vernon, and he asked for nothing more than to idle in the golden sunshine by her side while he smoked Egyptian cigarettes and watched the simple doings of the peasant peoples. They talked lazily of many things! of Nancy's coming, of their proposed visit to the Fayyum to see Girgis's farm, and of the possibility of their marriage in the following winter.

CHAPTER XIX

A WEEK of horrible anxiety for Stella brought forth no dreaded results. Mr. Lekejian had returned to the bosom of his family unhurt, Michael Ireton had left Asiut for Abydos, and Nancy had arrived and taken her place in the Lekejian household as simply and happily as though they had been English people living in Mayfair.

All Stella's dreaded explanations were unnecessary. Nancy simply washed her hands of the English inhabitants of Cairo—she had introductions to many important people: she refused to present any of them. Stella had not the courage to tell her that Vernon had asked her to prevent his sister paying them a visit during the season, and Vernon himself seemed anxious not to mention the fact—he had been led into one private talk with Nancy upon the subject of Stella's relations, in which Nancy had done some very plain speaking. Of course she knew nothing at all about the extremely difficult subject of mixed races in the East, and in her loyalty to Stella she under-estimated the enormous advantage it is to the young Egyptians in Cairo to have the example of healthy-minded, sport-loving Englishmen like Vernon Thorpe in their midst—for, with all their faults, the presence of the young Englishmen in Egypt is a healthy influence for the nation's moral regeneration. No other nation could give them a better example of the manly characteristics in which they are most lacking themselves.

Since Nancy's advent in Cairo, Nicolas had become a boy again. Her high spirits and inexhaustible vitality had shaken him out of himself: never had Stella seen him so light-hearted or happy. He had thrown off the gravity and silence which had become habitual to him since his

life had been spent in Cairo ; he was more like the enthusiastic and gay " old Nick " of his irresponsible student days in Paris. When Nancy saw him lapse into gravity and melancholy, she chaffed him out of it ; and as she had always been an object of adoration she never doubted her powers to beget affection, and she was not mistaken. Mr. Lekejian adored her : when she was in his presence he beamed on her with tender, approving eyes, and when she laughed he sighed. Alas, how seldom Stella's voice rang through the old house like Nancy's !

When the girls sauntered about the wonderful garden arm in arm, something very warm and gracious flowed through the old man's veins ; they were both so lovely, both so dear to him, for Nancy was inexpressibly dear to him because of her loyalty to Stella and her wholehearted adoption of his despised race. Also he had found, in this little girl who had carried all the way from England the freshness of hedge-roses in her cheeks and an English child's lightness of laughter in her voice, a woman of quick and resourceful intuition in a moment of need, and splendidly intelligent about the graver matters of life. On his return from Asiut he had discovered her installed in his house as a member of his family, playing with his son in a way which showed him that Nicolas was still very impressionable and delightfully young in spite of his grave manner ; and showering affection on both his wife and daughter.

Towards himself Nancy evinced the warmest tokens of friendship. The details of the Asiut disturbance he related to her word for word, and he realised that she seized upon the salient facts with a rapidity and sense that surprised even the quick intelligence of the Syrian. And Nancy was surprised to find what a staunch upholder of the English policy in the East Stella's father was. Nothing that his family had suffered through the narrow-mindedness of social circles in Cairo had budged him one inch from his loyalty to what he considered the right cause, or blinded him to the fact that only since the English had been in Egypt had there been anything resembling prosperity or peace in the country.

" Things are bad enough as they are," he told Nancy, as he had often told his wife and daughter. " The cesspools of Cairo are still here, but they are like lakes of pure water compared to what they once were. I am old enough to remember ' the other days,' and therefore I can judge. In my young days you could not walk through the native town without stepping into mire and filth which often came up over the ankles."

It was a strange experience for Nancy, to find herself a member of a household whose outlook upon many familiar subjects was entirely new to her. She had been thrust into the centre of a life palpitating with political unrest, she was seeing Egypt behind the veil . . . she was learning to look upon her own race as not altogether unimpeachable or without blemish.

During the week that Nancy was in Cairo she had many novel and exciting experiences. The second evening after her arrival she went with the Lekejians and her brother to see a Coptic wedding, and the night after to see a Mohammedan one. They were so similar in character that she would never have guessed that they were not both Mohammedan if Stella had not told her. Vernon was with them on both occasions, and Nancy was amazed to see how little real interest he took in the extraordinary ceremonies and festivities. He did not even think them picturesque, though the Mohammedan marriage was exceptionally splendid, for the household was celebrating a double event, the safe return of their elder son from Mecca and the marriage of their younger son to a wealthy carpet-merchant's daughter. The Lekejians were mere onlookers, like any other strangers, but through their intimate knowledge of Arabic Nancy was initiated into all that passed. At the Coptic wedding she and Stella were invited to go upstairs to the women's part of the house and be introduced to the bride, a shy, dark-eyed creature, sitting by herself in a little room apart from the crowd with her husband's best man. Her bridegroom was downstairs helping to entertain his guests, according to customary etiquette.

Nancy had also seen the return of a Hadji from Mecca . . . a sight she was never likely to forget, for its amazing picturesqueness and mediæval magnificence. To-night they were to go to an Arab theatre; the famous Arab tenor Stella had so often heard discussed by her brother and his musical friends was to sing two solos. Vernon was to make one of the party. When all the family were together on such occasions Nancy could not help noticing that her brother invariably found a place next to Mrs. Lekejian, if he was not with Stella, for Mrs. Lekejian was extremely fond of him and often fought his battles when Nancy attacked her brother with her hot tongue and ready wit. Nancy had divined that Mrs. Lekejian was the only one of the party who understood Vernon or whom Vernon understood; the qualities which Stella had *not* inherited from her mother kept a veil between herself and her lover which could never be lifted. During the performance at the Arab theatre Stella was more than usually silent.

Nancy was not to discover the reason until long afterwards: Stella had been invited that same afternoon to take an active part on the working committee which was being organised in connection with the new Government schools for the practical education of native girls in domestic subjects. Her mind was running on the main features of the project, and they were keeping her preoccupied.

The Arab play, which was very biblical to Nancy, because of the biblical dress of the actors, who were all men, and their solemn mien, as they sat on chairs arranged in a half-moon far back on the stage and declaimed in dignified tones, was not interesting enough to hold Stella's attention; and, as Nancy did not understand a word of what was being said, the proceedings, with their unvaried monotony of tone and gesture, "bored her to tears," she declared to Nicolas.

Suddenly, the drama seemed to be gaining in interest, for there were moans, and groans, and curious *un*-human exclamations of emotion coming from the large audience of men which filled the body of the theatre. All the women were out of sight in a gallery, behind a grille like a nuns' gallery in a Catholic church. The wave of excitement was followed by two veiled women being dragged across the stage by fresh actors. At this juncture even Stella evinced a little interest, and tried to interpret what was happening to Nancy; but the particular event of the evening was the tenor, who came forward at last and was welcomed with wild and strange tokens of enthusiasm. Nancy and Vernon were the only two Europeans in the house, Mrs. Lekejian excepted.

Just before the tenor commenced singing Nancy noticed a wave of colour flood Stella's pale skin, and a look of surprised pleasure light up her tragic eyes. Nancy did not betray that she had noticed Stella's emotion, but followed her gaze across the house to the level of the stalls, and in so doing met the commanding eyes of Michael Ireton fixed on their box. She wondered who he was, with his air of distinction—a distinction of individuality and strength. When the tenor began, Michael Ireton was forgotten, for never before had Nancy heard anything so monstrously funny or so unlike her idea of beautiful singing. To her ignorant ears it was frightfully ridiculous; if the man was singing a love-song, she thought it would have made a cat laugh. Her eyes sought Stella's and when they met the two girls could scarcely conceal their amusement. Vernon had retired to the back of the box, where he remained literally doubled up with quiet laughter.

But the Arab men in the body of the house were moved

and enchanted. When he quavered and trilled, in the strangest of falsetto voices, on one beat of a note for a longer time than usual, they called out, "God approve thee, God prosper thy voice!" Nancy thought she could not endure it a moment longer without laughing outright, yet the natives groaned or rocked to and fro with delight. In their enjoyment there was something sensual and indelicate, and the grunts of satisfaction they gave hurt the girl's innate sense of decency. She was glad the Lekejians' box removed them from the level of the crowd, for she felt that she would not like to meet the eyes of any one of the Arabs who were giving such curious vent to their appreciation. Stella was thankful that only her father and Nicolas could understand the words of the song, for they were just bad enough for Orientals to make their meaning much worse in their imaginings. When the song was ended, and the Arabs had grunted and sighed out their tokens of approval and had showered roses and jasmine flowers at the singer, Michael Ireton appeared in their box. From the first moment when he shook hands with Stella and said his formal "How do you do?" to Vernon, Nancy knew that the big, dominating man loved her brother's fiancée, and as a brother is never a very romantic personality to a sister she wondered why Stella preferred Vernon to this rather mysterious being who reminded her of all that she had heard about Cecil Rhodes.

To-night Vernon looked delightfully well bred and physically fit, and almost as fair as Nancy herself. In this land of dark-eyed, almond-skinned peoples, he seemed strikingly clean and blue-eyed. Michael Ireton's eyes were unremarkable in size or colour, it was their sincerity and melancholy that made them the pleasant feature of his rather massive face. There was nothing little about Ireton, and curiously enough, one of Nancy's first thoughts about him was what Stella's had often been: "What a rock of defence round any woman his arms would be, what rest for any woman to find herself lost in their strength!" Nancy scarcely spoke to him, and when the party left their box to walk up and down the ugly little corridor outside, during the second and last act, she noticed how anxious he was to speak to Stella alone. For some feminine reason she helped him to achieve his object.

"You are not looking well," he said to Stella, after her slight embarrassment at meeting him had subsided; "have things been troubling you over much since I saw you last?" He looked at her earnestly and spoke very guardedly: in his bearing towards her there was more emotion than in his words, and Stella felt it.

"No, oh no!" she said quickly, "things have been better. . . . Nancy is such a dear, I love having her."

"I'm so glad, little girl," he said tenderly, "for I'm going away, and it will make things easier for me to know that you have got her with you . . . that . . ." He did not finish, for Stella's cry of "Going away?" startled him: her words merely repeated his own, but there was a world of meaning in them.

"Yes, going away," he said, "for I find myself defeated, utterly routed. I can't be only your friend, Hadassah. . . . I knew it when I saw you to-night; it's no use pretending."

A sudden desire to free herself from Vernon overwhelmed her . . . she longed for nothing so much as to tell Michael Ireton to stay—to stay and pretend no longer. She could scarcely get breath enough to speak . . . Ireton thought he had hurt her.

"I know I promised," he said, "never to speak of this again: I'm a selfish beast, but . . ." he paused, "well, I only wanted to explain why I am going away for ever without seeing you any more; I was pretending it was for your sake, but it is pure selfishness . . . forgive me!"

Stella held out a trembling hand. "Don't go, please don't go . . . I want you to stay . . ." there was something in her voice that made him turn with a sudden directness and look at her . . . he had been avoiding her eyes, not even glancing at her pale face while he spoke.

"I am not to go . . . *you* ask me to stay?" He seemed to tower over her in a way which made her feel very helpless and captured. "You can only mean one thing in saying that . . . *do* you mean it, Haddassah? . . . *can* you mean it?" He seized her hands and crushed them in his until the pain almost made her cry out—they were alone in a part of the passage which was unfrequented. She did not answer, so he repeated, "Is it true? Why do you ask me to stay?"

She tried to free herself and said, "Go—oh go, go! You must think I am mad."

But he held her fast. "You are not mad," he said; "but the maddest thing you can do is to marry a man you don't any longer love . . . it is wronging *him* as well as yourself . . . Don't send we away if you care for me! Things will come right."

The suggestion from his lips that she no longer loved Vernon horrified her: of course she loved him, if she loved any one on earth. She tried to tell him so, but her lame protests were stopped, for there was a commotion and cries of alarm: Stella heard words which blanched her cheeks and made her fly from Michael Ireton's side

to the entrance of their box, where a crowd had gathered. When she reached the door, Nicolas sprang to her side, and put his arm round her: "Come with me, Stella," he said tenderly; "Vernon has been wounded: he saved father's life a moment ago down in the *buffet*." It seemed as if Stella herself had been suddenly stabbed, for she almost sank to the ground. Nicolas whispered to her, "Be brave, dear; he is not dangerously hurt."

"And father, is he safe? Where *is* Vernon? Take me to him." With a splendid effort she straightened herself and said, "I am all right; I will be perfectly calm."

"Father wasn't touched, and Vernon's not badly hurt."

"Where is he? You must let me go to him."

A feeling of shame for her disloyalty to Vernon flooded her being. "Take me to him, Nicolas," she said most pleadingly; "he will be expecting me." She longed to abase herself before Vernon to atone for her guilt.

"You can't see him to-night, dearest; he's gone to the hospital. Fortunately Dr. Mason was in the house, just outside the *buffet;* he carried him off at once in a cab; he'll be all right when the bleeding's stopped."

Stella collapsed on the seat nearest the door in their box. Nancy flew to her, pale and trembling but calm; her young arms closed tenderly round the shattered girl. "He'll be all right, darling, in no time . . . it is nothing serious, it really isn't," she appealed touchingly to Nicolas. "The doctor said it wasn't, didn't he?" She looked again to Nicolas to back her words, for Mrs. Lekejian had gone home with her husband.

Stella made a great effort to regain her self-control. "How did it happen?" she said. "Have they caught the murderer? Oh, these wretches, how merciless they are!"

"Yes, they got him—he's in safe keeping now. To do him justice, he didn't make any attempt to escape; he's one of the Al-Lewa crowd, and considers that the part father has played in exposing the corruption of the native courts has proved conclusively that he is a traitor to Egypt's freedom, it fired a wretched youth, an independent Nationalist, to attempt his murder; he considers father's work in the whole affair was 'anti-Egyptian.' Poor youth—he's simply been inflamed to madness by the Al-Lewa party. Anyhow he's risked his own neck for the sake of what he considers his country's good. Vernon behaved splendidly: father undoubtedly would have been killed if he hadn't sprung at the wretch and spoilt his aim."

"Oh," Stella said, with a pitiful cry, "the wicked

murderers! How I hate them all! How I hate myself! Take me home—let's go home, Nancy." She said the last words insistently. As she saw Michael Ireton's tall figure enter their box, she clung feverishly to Nicolas. "Where is he wounded? Poor Vernon . . . is he conscious? . . . are you keeping anything back? . . . Tell me the truth, I prefer it. . . ."

Nicolas drew her away while he asked Ireton to look after Nancy, to whom the whole thing was bewilderingly and horrifying; truly the lust and passion of the East was being revealed to her hour by hour. She could not but feel very proud of Vernon, and somehow just a little glad that he had been given an opportunity of proving to Stella the sound metal he was made of. Knowing his excellent constitution, she felt confident of his quick recovery . . . in a day or two he would be playing polo again just as he so often had done after accidents which had alarmed all onlookers at the game. Nicolas had described to her how Vernon had seen the man's revolver pointed at his father, and without pausing for one second had thrown his glass of lemon squash in the man's eyes, with the result that the weapon was turned on himself as the man's arm swung round.

Any snobbishness she had accused him of in Cairo was entirely wiped out: he was wholly reinstated in Nancy's good books again.

As Michael Ireton said good-night to her in the Arab courtyard of the Lekejians' house, he said: "This is the first time we have met, but there is a great bond of sympathy between us. We are both Stella's devoted friends, I am going away, and I will not see her again for a long time. I am very thankful to know that you are with her . . . her life is very difficult here, she has told me that you make all the difference in the world."

"I do nothing," Nancy said ardently. "What can any one do? I only love her and . . ." She paused.

He quickly interrupted her. "That is how you help her," he said: "you love her, she needs love—abundant love and understanding. You will not grudge her either?"

As he finished speaking he raised the girl's small hands to his lips. "Good-bye," he said gravely, "and God bless you: I may never see you again."

"Good-bye," Nancy said. With girlish simplicity she added, "I wish you weren't going away: I think in Egypt it would be nice to have a big friend like you."

CHAPTER XX

VERNON'S recovery was not such an easy and speedy one as Nancy had predicted. The wound healed satisfactorily, but his temperature had a nasty habit of rising and falling, in the way that temperatures do rise and fall in the East, even with the healthiest patients. When Stella saw him for the first time after the accident he made so little of what he had done that she could have knelt at his bedside in humility, but whenever she attempted to thank him or to praise him for his splendid nerve he would say, "Oh chuck it, old girl! There isn't the greatest rotter living who wouldn't have done the same thing as I did."

Until her brother was in a more safely convalescent stage Nancy refused to go up the Nile or leave Cairo, so the Littlejohns had to go without her; after all she didn't care very much, for it would have meant leaving Stella and losing touch with the thrilling life she was living. Was she not almost taking part in the making of Egyptian history? That the East was not her home, made everything that belonged to it absorbingly fascinating. What revolted Stella and made her heart-sick often thrilled Nancy: it was all a part of the mystery and spell of the East, even when it was horrible.

When Vernon was well enough to be moved he was ordered off to a sanatorium at Helouan, and it was during his convalescence there that Stella begged her mother to take Nancy and herself for a short visit to Medinat-al Fayyum. Instead of staying in the town itself, with Girgis Boutros and his aunt and cousin in their white villa, with its green jalousies, on the bank of the Bahr Yusuf, they induced Girgis to make arrangements for them to sleep in the sportsman's hotel or rest-house, built on piles over the historical Lake Moeris, which lies out in the desert some miles from Medinat-al Fayyum.

. . . . . .

It was a roasting hot afternoon when Girgis, attired in the most perfect riding kit of English build, met them at the station. Nancy, who had only seen him once, in correct calling attire in Cairo (his mother had a fine house there and was very particular about her son's social etiquette), was not prepared for his appearance in immaculate brown riding-boots, the latest thing in riding coats and breeches, surmounted with the inevitable scarlet *tarbush*. It made an odd combination, but the costume suited him perfectly and he knew how to wear it. He

told them that he wished to take them to his aunt's house in the town—he lived with his aunt—to have tea before escorting them to Lake Moeris. Feeling very tired and hot, they gladly consented to do as he had arranged. When his three visitors were seated in a luxuriously appointed, but strangely old-fashioned, landau, Girgis mounted his Arab mare. Nancy thought it the most beautiful beast she had ever seen as it all but danced at their side : its curved neck, its long, flowing tail, its delight in its own beauty, kept her in a constant state of acclamation. Girgis, who knew that he set off the Arab's beauty to its greatest advantage, did not betray by even a smile that he was in the seventh heaven of delight. Stella he still worshipped, she was his divinity, he hungered to own her, to make her his wife—but this flower-like girl appealed to his imagination like a garden where exotic flowers wafted their fragrance to him over cool waters. Her fair throat and delicate face, her laughing eyes of lapis-blue, could make him forget that her people, her own brother belonged to the hated race who despised him. From the moment when she placed her soft-palmed hand in his he had succumbed : her fragrant personality had lifted him into realms of Oriental delight.

As they drove from the station and passed from a hideous bareness, mingled with dust and flies and Eastern smells, to the cool river banks, bordered with spreading willows and swaying tamarisks, Nancy's quick eye and intuitive brain taught her more than years of explanation could have done. She already knew that in the East, where strong contrasts are for ever forcing themselves upon you, you need never be surprised at anything : Girgis's *tarbush*, worn with English riding-boots and tweed clothes, were illustrative of the fact. So when they stopped in front of an imposing villa, which seemed to her very French and un-Eastern with its white walls and green jalousies, she was not astonished when the door was opened by a boy of seven years of age who looked like an unfeathered starling which had not yet digested its early meal of worms

Girgis hurried them into a sitting-room on the ground floor. It was the most uninteresting, uninviting room Nancy had ever been in. Photographs in silver-wire frames, tied up with bright yellow ribbons, were conspicuous on every article of furniture which could hold a picture frame ; heavy albums, bound in plush, lay on oval-shaped maplewood tables. A set of stiff gold chairs too uncomfortable to sit upon, were planted in a row round the walls ; the cool view of the flowing Bahr Yusuf was entirely hidden by stiff Nottingham-lace curtains. Girgis

knew that the room was hideous, but neither of the girls knew that he did. He also knew that his aunt would appear in a few minutes in an appalling tea-gown of purple flannelette, but he might have thought it a creation of Worth's for all the girls could guess by his expression when she entered the room. He knew that the whole business of afternoon tea would shock Stella, but he was not ashamed: they were his relations and her near connections; Stella's neck must be bent!

When at last his aunt came awkwardly into the room, followed by her heavy-featured daughter, Stella could scarcely believe they were people of the same rank in life as Girgis, for Mrs. Ha Boutros seemed to Stella more like a second-rate Italian inn-keeper's wife than an Egyptian; but her voice was soft and her clear pronunciation of English was refined. Mrs. Lekejian, who had only seen her once before, many years ago, greeted her with a charming air of family relationship—she had heard many things from Girgis about his aunt which had made her respect and like her very much. But Mrs. Boutros was very shy, and this made conversation extremely difficult. Her daughter, who was too shy to speak, sat on the edge of her gilt chair close to Nancy and looked at her with the surprised eyes of a cow. Nancy did not know what to speak to her about . . . Anything like intimacy was hopeless, for the girl simply answered "yes" and "no" to her remarks about Al Fayyum. Topics soon became exhausted. Girgis, realising Nancy's difficulty, asked if tea was coming; it arrived just as he spoke.

A huge silver tea-tray was carried round the room to each person by a trembling Coptic maid-servant, whose complexion and features were so beautiful that Nancy could scarcely resist speaking about her. She wore a native dress of clinging black, with her hair modestly hidden under a bright blue handkerchief. Nancy wondered why her mistress could not see how sweet she looked compared to her own daughter; Girgis must, she felt sure, for he had perfect taste in his own details of dress. After the maid had handed round the tea, which was cold and weak, Miss Boutros rose from her chair awkwardly and offered her guests some of Huntley and Palmer's mixed biscuits, piled up in a little wire basket decorated with bright yellow ribbon. Stella and Nancy dared not let their eyes meet. In a land where old dishes of exquisite colours and shapes are to be bought for a few pence it seemed a dreadful perversion of taste to be drinking tea out of vile Japanese cups and eating biscuits off twisted-wire baskets.

When the tea, a dreadful concoction made with unboiled

water, was drunk, and a few more platitudes had been exchanged, Stella said she thought they ought to be getting on their way, as her mother was very tired. Their hostess, obviously relieved that their visit was at an end, did not attempt to detain them, though she was delighted Girgis had brought them, and she felt proud that such a beautiful girl as Stella was her own nephew's first cousin. She was longing to discuss every point of their looks and dress with her daughter, who, poor thing, was not so well satisfied with her best clothes as she had been before their arrival. With a jealous woman's double-sight she had seen that Girgis was in love with Stella and that he was enthralled with Nancy's beauty, though Nancy's fairness was to her too strange to be beautiful. She had heard of fair Western women in romances, but she had never imagined that a living woman could look so unreal as the English girl seemed in her Eastern eyes.

When they were once more comfortably seated in the carriage, Nancy gave a sigh of relief. She did not like to be the first to say anything, because, after all, these people were near connections of Stella's and first cousins of Girgis; but when he was out of hearing, which was very soon, for his Arab mare could not be induced to go at their driving pace, Mrs. Lekejian said to Stella, "What a pity! Why can't they be contented to live in the old style? I wonder Girgis doesn't see it."

"I'm sure he does, mother," Stella said; "but he thinks that living in the European style is a step towards progress and regeneration, and you know how keen he is about all that sort of thing. It certainly gives the women something to do, for there's more to look after, with lace curtains and carpets and all those hideous ornaments about." She laughed at the memory of their visit, but it was a kindly laugh.

"How *would* they live if it was in the native way?" Nancy asked. "Not like harem women, doing absolutely nothing?"

"Oh, no, but quite differently," Mrs. Lekejian said. "The old native houses were lovely."

"Had the Copts fine houses like the Arabs?" Nancy asked.

"Well, no, they hadn't"—she paused—"for in the old days, when these splendid houses were built, the Christians were too poor—they were never allowed to have any money; but now why can't they build their grand new houses in the old way, and live in them in the old style? They would feel at home in them and look much less absurd. That poor girl! . . ." she sighed.

Nancy had seen some of the glorious old Arab houses in Cairo, hidden away in unexpected quarters, but she had associated their beauty with the fact that they were Mohammedan buildings; she did not know that in most respects the Copts in the old days lived like their Moslem neighbours and would have had houses similar to theirs if they had had the money to buy them . . . she did not understand that their wealth was a thing of later growth, that, like all despised races, they had made their money by usury and diligent hoarding.

Nancy thought for a moment and then, turning to Stella, she said: "I did think Girgis was sweet to them, didn't you? He was so well bred, so dignified. I'm sure I should have been a snob and done my best to show visitors that I knew how awful they were."

Stella looked pleased, and so did her mother. "Girgis is quite extraordinary," they both said; "one never knows what he feels. With all his revolutionary ideas he's a true philosopher."

"Oh," Nancy said, "I'm sure he is awfully sensitive; but it was his loyalty to his people."

The Arab mare pranced up to them at that moment. Girgis managed to keep her within speaking distance; he looked very happy. He addressed Stella: "My aunt was greatly pleased to see you. She asked me to thank you for honouring her." (Girgis very seldom now said "If you please," Stella had chaffed him out of it.) "She thinks you are very beautiful and high-minded."

"Oh, you mustn't make me vain! It was your aunt who deserved our thanks."

"Excuse me, but I could not make you vain."

Stella laughed. "Why not?" she said. "I am only human."

"Because what *I* think and what my cousins think could not make you vain, and you know it; and I thank *you* also for coming," he bowed to Nancy. "It was not gay for you. I am sorry."

"Oh, but I enjoyed my visit," she said; "I wish we could have stayed longer. Your cousin must know such a lot of things that would interest us. I wanted to make friends and talk with her about all sorts of things."

"They have been very curious to see my cousin Hadassah, now they are satisfied. For many days they will talk about your visit." His un-mirthful Egyptian smile broke the severity of his features. "My cousin has only seen painted pictures of virgins like you"—he looked at Nancy; "she did not understand that in a country where there is much moisture the women grow up like flowers; they are as

sweet to the nostrils as almond blossom in spring. And so you must excuse her ; I saw her look very much."

"You say these things so prettily that even when I know you don't mean them I enjoy hearing them," Nancy said gaily. Her laughter was so infectious and mirthful that it inflamed his quick blood. His mare responded to his mood: her nostrils distended, her tail curved, she danced with the pride of life. . . .

"But *I* speak the truth, if you please"—his eyes met Stella's as his old habit of speech slipped out—"you carry the sweetness of white night-flowers into the unwatered desert."

Nancy seeing that he was serious, smiled her thanks.

"*You* think, do you not, that my cousin Hadassah is very beautiful?" Nancy nodded her head. "And Hadassah told me that you were like an English rose. Why is it then *not* true if I say you are both beautiful to me?"

Mrs. Lekejian and Stella joined in Nancy's laughter, for Girgis had certainly gained his point.

They had left far behind them the precincts of the oasis city, with its dull bazaars full of cheap European goods, and its streets with fine European villas, built out of the wealth which has belonged to the people of Al Fayyum ever since the day when Joseph, the controller of Pharaoh's household, bestowed upon the surrounding country the network of canals and reservoirs which have made the Fayyum famous as an agricultural centre for all Egypt.

In the desert the dazzling heat was moving like a wave over the country ; the long, dusty road was black with market people coming towards them on camels, on donkeys, and on foot ; the heavy necklaces and anklets of the women showed the wealth of the country and caught the sunlight as they walked. It was all intensely Eastern, and, as Nancy remarked, the "limit" was reached when a porcupine instead of a rabbit scurried across their path into the dust of the desert.

As the hours passed, and there was little to break the monotony of the endless processions of blackrobed women, and the long string of camels walking as though they were all one beast, at the same pace, with the same movements, and the same lofty indifference, they were not sorry to arrive at the little hotel which has been built for sportsmen on piles over the lake. They had to climb an outside stair like a ladder to reach the front door. A cry of delight burst from Nancy's lips as she saw the cool interior where they were to dine: the canvas walls were hung with the usual Egyptian decorations, the animal gods of the ancients, and gay texts from the Koran, cut out in brilliant shades of

yellows and greens and blues, and stitched on to red cotton. At intervals there were openings in the walls to admit the cool breeze from the lake and show inviting glimpses of softly moving tamarisks and low-flying water-birds. The dinner-table was decorated with crimson roses which Stella knew her cousin Girgis must have ordered the day before from Al Fayyum, and comfortable couches ran all round the room, which was long and narrow, and not unlike the cabin of a ship. The glimpses of the lake which surrounded it on all sides added to the impression and delighted each one of the party as they sank gratefully on to the divans.

Hadassah sat next to her cousin ; in a low voice she said to him, "Girgis, dear, you are so kind." She laid her hand lightly on his arm, but she felt him tremble under her touch, and quickly removed it. "We are enjoying ourselves so much, and I understand the trouble you have taken. All this is perfectly delightful."

"But you are not happy," he said. All her attempts to appear gay had not deceived him.

"I have been anxious about father and Vernon," she said ; "the change here will do me good." She turned her eyes away, his unnerved her.

"You are unhappy," he repeated.

Mrs. Lekejian and Nancy had put their heads outside. the canvas opening ; they could not hear what Stella said. "Why do you say it ?" she said ; "I wish you wouldn't" —but she had not denied it.

"I know why you are unhappy—it is not anxiety for your father—but for to-day please try to forget." His voice was so gentle that the smile she bestowed upon him was appreciative of his kindness.

Suddenly he said : "Since I have seen his sister I do not hate him so much."

"Hush !" Stella said. She looked nervously at him ; an unacknowledged fear took definite shape in her mind as she did so.

"No !" he said, "I do not love Miss Nancy. If I had never seen you I would have desired her, but not now. You exhaust my senses : I have none for any other woman. But she is pure and beautiful, and she is his sister. How is such a thing possible ?"

"Have you already forgotten what we owe to Vernon ? You should love him for it. When I think that but for him we should not have had father, I feel that I could lay my very soul in his hands to do just as he liked with."

Girgis became excited. "And what did he do, if you please ? Only what any man would have done, only what no man could *not* have done. He had the good chance

to be the man chosen to do this thing . . . while *I*, who long to serve you, was only a few yards away. Why has he all the fortune? Now will you feel that whatever he does, or thinks, you must bear with it; you will give him your soul. . . . I would have saved your father and died for him, if only to win tenderness always from your eyes when you thought of me."

"Girgis, why do you still think of me like that? . . . Try not to."

"When you loved Vernon Thorpe could you have made yourself not love him? Who can do these things? We cannot help love, we cannot help love."

Stella noticed that he had said "*when*" you loved Vernon, but she ignored the inference. "No, no," she said, "one can't help loving, I know that, but *you* only think you love me, I'm sure you do—you gave yourself no time, you didn't know me; you said you would marry me the first time we met. Do you remember?" she tried to treat the matter more lightly.

"Because you came like light into my heart, and, like the full moon, the mystery of your beauty raised my love to worship. You are my divinity."

His romantic manner of expressing his love for her brought the tender smile that he loved to see into her eyes. In spite of the fact that her Western upbringing had imbued her with the feeling that love poetically expressed was seldom, if ever, deeply felt, she was conscious that her cousin had a feeling for her which was far removed from the sensuous passion of most Egyptians. She felt sorry for him, and troubled about how to treat him; at the same time the relief she experienced in the fact that Nancy, with her glowing personality and vitality, had not inspired him with an overwhelming passion, outbalanced her sorrow that he was still romantically attached to herself. He was very attractive this afternoon in his capacity as host, and his good qualities appealed to Stella none the less for Nancy's very obvious approval of him.

They had good appetites for the beautifully cooked dinner, he had personally supervised. He knew Stella's likes and dislikes, and as she watched him while he attended to their various wants, she could scarcely believe that his home life was spent in the absurd surroundings they had seen that afternoon; yet, in spite of his ease of manner and perfect familiarity with Western methods of entertaining, she could not think of him as her cousin by blood, he was still one of the enigmas of Egypt. That Vernon had saved her father's life was never long absent from Stella's thoughts—she was in return ready to lay down her life for him; but

the deed had not brought them any closer together, for in her gratitude she had placed herself on a new and almost strange footing towards her lover. He implored her to forget her gratitude—in her tenderness towards him he missed the old fire of her first passion. If Michael Ireton had not spoken to her, and she had not allowed herself to be false in thought to her lover at the very moment when he was offering up his own life for her father's—she might perhaps have retained her former independence. Now she must make amends for that moment of sudden surrender to the man who had taught her what his deeper nature knew of a lover's devotion for the woman he prized.

After dinner Girgis disappeared, and they did not see him again until they said good-night to him: they little imagined that he was supervising the erection of mosquito-curtains on their various beds, and seeing that their bedrooms were as attractive as he could make them. With the awful masterfulness of an ancient Egyptian he had insisted upon mosquito-netting being produced from somewhere. It had been forgotten, but it *was* produced! A native runner had been to the Fayyum and back in an incredibly short space of time. His brown body, naked but for the meagerest loin-cloth, was now steaming like a roast of beef which had just been pulled from the oven, and his tongue was parched to a cinder, but the mosquito-netting for the rich "Seti" had been procured. If Stella had seen the poor wretch panting on a circular prayer-mat made of straw, at the back door of the inn she would have thought her security from mosquito-bites dearly bought. But Girgis feared that malarious mosquitoes might hover round their lake dwelling, and if the native had died from exhaustion, his place in the world could be filled at dawn by a new man.

It was only nine o'clock when they went to bed, because their day had begun very early; but Nancy and Stella, who shared one queer little room, talked until at least an hour later. Their mosquito-curtains prevented them sitting on the edge of their beds in their customary fashion so they sat on the cool straw-matted floor, with their arms hugging their knees.

Nancy's flood of golden hair, which entirely hid her face, made Stella's seem very dark, just as her gay and mischievous face proved that Stella's had grown very serious for her years. In Nancy's eyes Stella now resembled Rossetti's "La belle dame sans merci"—especially when her hair was let down for brushing.

Suddenly Nancy put her chin on her knees, and for a

moment her gay voice became serious. "Stella," she said, "how does it feel to have three men in love with you at one time?"

Stella, to hide her embarrassment said, "Don't be an ass, Nancy."

Nancy sighed. "I'd be quite contented with one. What's the use of being pretty if no one loves you?"

"One of the three who, you imagine, are in love with me, do you mean?"

"No." Nancy's eyes dropped. "No," she repeated slowly, "I'm not a Ptolemy, so I couldn't marry my own brother, and Michael Ireton . . ." she paused and looked at Stella, who instantly unclasped her hair and let it fall over her face. Her apparent impatience did not unnerve Nancy, who continued, "Michael Ireton is too monogamous—he'd make *me* unfaithful in a week; while Girgis . . ." she gave a little shiver, "oh! he'd terrify me. He might turn out to be a Bluebeard."

Stella looked at her suspiciously. . . . "Why . . . I thought you admired him?"

"So I do, and I like him most awfully, all we know of him; but neither you nor I really know him, or will ever know him."

Stella nodded her head. "That's what I feel."

Nancy always spoke as though she and Stella belonged to the same race of people. "He knows far more about us than we know about him—I mean the human part of our natures. He may not have met many Englishwomen, but he has the ancients' understanding of human nature.

Stella said very gravely: "*We* know only the civilised part of him, which is the lesser part."

"Of course, that's all we ever know about any one," Nancy said; "it's all we allow people to know . . . we hardly know the 'other part' of our own selves, do we?"

"But with Girgis the uncivilised part belongs to a strange people. . . ." Stella paused abruptly in the middle of her speech; her hair still veiled her face.

"Well?" Nancy said, "go on."

"I often try to visualise the Girgis we don't know, the Girgis who has nothing to do with Coptic schools, and electric ploughs, and automatic wells, and brown riding-boots, and afternoon teas; the Girgis who still in his heart worships 'Sebek,' the Crocodile God of Al Fayyum; the Girgis who would have offered up his own sister as a victim to the Nile for the propitiation of its bountiful overflowing."

Nancy shivered.

"He is, with all his love of progress and hunger for

modernity and for the regeneration of Egypt, a reincarnation of an ancient Pharaoh—I see it so often in him. He wears his clothes beautifully—and how well he chooses them !—but they don't really hide the inscrutable statue of the Pharaoh he really is, do they ? "

"No," Nancy said, "not a bit."

"There is nothing living," Stella said slowly, "that I have seen in all Egypt so Eastern as my own cousin Girgis. And the more he adopts the fine veneer of European civilisation, the more Eastern he appears to me."

"Aren't you very proud of it ? I feel so terribly modern when I am with him." She was examining Stella's pretty almond nails and slender fingers.

Stella caught her hand tightly in hers : "You're a darling, Nancy ; you've been so sweet, we all adore you." Her voice shook.

"Oh, Stella ! It is all of you who have been adorable to me."

"You know everything and understand everything now, you have met my relations on my father's side : are you not just a little ashamed of the connection ? "

Nancy took the veil of dark hair in her hands and drew it away from Stella's face so that she could look into her eyes while she answered. "Not in the least," she said slowly ; "I hate the beastly stuck-up English people who can't see the difference there is between you, dearest, and all your clever family, and the ordinary common Levantines and natives whom both you and I abhor. Who *could* be ashamed of Girgis ? "

"I'm not," Stella said, "but I know the way in which English people are taught to regard all races who belong to the Eastern hemisphere. . . . Vernon didn't want you to visit us : we almost quarrelled over your coming."

"Good heavens ! Is that why you wrote that letter and sent the wire which I never got ? "

"Yes, it was to please him."

"And I came in spite of everything. How can you love such a snob ? . . ." she looked into Stella's eyes searchingly, and said again . . . "Why *do* you love him ? "

Stella let her hair screen her face again as she bent her head . . . "Hush, Nancy, don't ! You shouldn't speak of him like that—how can you ! . . . we never know why we love ; but surely, now, he *is* worth loving. . . ."

"I couldn't marry a man who was a snob. You think he was frightfully brave because he saved your father . . . well, if he *hadn't* done it, he'd have been a coward—that's another way of looking upon his act of heroism. . . ."

"Fancy being ashamed of anything that belonged to you!" she went on hotly. "I thought Girgis's cousins were funny and awfully awkward in their stuffy, ugly European clothes, and so did you! . . . but just think what we should have looked like in their eyes if we had chosen to wear Eastern dresses without knowing how they should be put on! I guess we'd have made an even greater muddle of it than they did; besides, isn't it awful to let ourselves care so much about these trivial things. I felt all the time that both the mother and daughter must know about all sorts of interesting things that they were too shy to introduce into conversation. Think of how little chance they have had to feel at ease in strange society."

"It's the trivial things that weigh down the scales of life. . . ." Stella said quietly; "if we could rise above trivial things life would be comparatively easy."

"That's true," Nancy said thoughtfully, "but I can't believe that my own brother didn't want me to visit his future wife's relations. It makes me sick to think of it, and ashamed of him."

"But it's quite true. He urged me to go home and wait for him in England, so that I should not have to mix with my father's people . . . and I want to do things he'd hate . . . I want to do all I can with money and education to help to raise the women, for if the women were better educated and were treated with greater respect by the men, they could do far more for the advancement of Egypt than all the acts of parliaments and public bodies put together that try to put down vice and dirt and horribleness: for you mustn't be mistaken about things . . . out here they are horrible . . ." she made a face of disgust. . . . "*Cairo* is horrible; the visitors only see the fair side of it, but the truth would horrify you. . . ." She sighed. "When scarcely any of the women can read, and when they have no idea of a moral training for their sons, and are even without the most ignorant sense of decency in the matter of cleanliness, what can you expect? . . . Vernon never wants you to know that I belong to that side of Cairo really—the native side, I mean."

Nancy's temper was up in a flash, her violet eyes were as black as onyx: "Know what? I should like to know: know that your brother and father have twice the brains that he has, that they are both too well bred to be the snob that he is, that when he's with them he must, if he has any feelings at all, know how ignorant he is compared to them both. Oh! don't you see that he's a walking monument of Anglo-Saxon vanity and prejudice? I don't see how you can go on loving him. I saw Nicolas looking at

him the other night when he said quite proudly that he had never even heard of, let alone read a word of 'Omar Khayyám' in his life. Nicolas couldn't believe it . . ." She looked at Stella for a reply.

"Don't you want me to go on loving him, dear?"

Nancy's anger broke down. "Yes, of course I do; I'll be awfully sick if you ever fall *out* of love with him; if you were lost to the family it would be ghastly."

"Then why say things like that?"

"I only say them because I know you always will love him in spite of everything. You're so blind when you care for people: I suppose that's why they say love is blind."

Stella began brushing her hair very diligently. In the days that had passed since the attempted murder of her father she had almost succeeded in banishing Michael's dominating personality from her thoughts, and was living once more in a dream of imaginery love for Vernon . . . he had saved her father's life, and by so doing had unconsciously surrounded himself with an atmosphere of heroic romance. Yet if her soul could have spoken to Nancy it would have said, "The man I once loved bored me: he is your brother; take him away, let everything be finished between us, let me pay for his deed of heroism in another way than by becoming his wife. . . ." But the soul did not speak, and the woman was too eagerly engaged in deceiving herself and clothing her Fallen God with the garments of Love to allow it a chance.

Nancy, little dreaming of the thoughts Stella was hiding behind her veil of dark hair, said: "Tell me, Stella, has Nicolas ever been in love?"

"I think he once cared for a girl, I'm nearly sure he did; but he's never mentioned a word of it to me; he is very reserved, as you can see."

"What happened? . . . Was she an English girl?" If Stella could have seen Nancy's eyes as she asked the question, she would have learned that the asking of that question was the "postscript" of the girl's conversation.

"I think he'd hate me to speak about it." Stella paused . . . "Yes, the girl was English, he knew her when he lived in Paris . . . she allowed him to get fond of her, and do everything for her, all that a devoted friend may do, I mean; when he came to Cairo she got her mother to bring her out to Egypt. . . ." Stella was breathless; her indignation had risen, but she was trying to speak indifferently. Nancy saw her emotion. . . . "In Cairo she . . . well, she dropped him!"

"Little beast!" Nancy hissed. "What's become of her? Does he love her still?"

"She's married the heir to a baronetcy who is drinking himself to death."

"And does Nicolas still care?" Nancy said persistently.

"No, I don't think so; he was heart-hurt rather than heart-broken at the time even; but he was so badly hurt that he never trusts any woman now: with all his gentleness of disposition he is dreadfully cynical. The girl looked so young and sympathetic, mother says, but she was really as hard as nails and as selfish as a man."

Nancy picked up her brush and rose to her feet. . . . "Then if *I* fall in love with Nicolas I shall have to propose to him?"

Stella caught hold of her feet and brought the girl toppling to the ground; she caught her in her arms and held her like a child. "Nancy," she cried, looking into the naughty eyes and laughing face . . . 'Nancy, you mustn't . . . promise me, Nancy, you won't play with him."

"Oh! don't be alarmed," she said . . . "Your Nicolas is *quite* safe, he doesn't think me 'as sweet to the nostrils' as Girgis does . . ." she went into a fit of laughter at the thought of Girgis's similes. . . . "Girgis makes me scream, he's so quaint, and so delightfully poetic; I can't imagine Vernon even thinking the things he says: . . . "I shouldn't think Vernon ever took the trouble to think out poetic speeches, does he?"

Stella blushed guiltily, for in her imagination it was not Vernon's form of English love-making to which her mind had flown, but the few fierce words Michael Ireton had spoken, words which had stirred more fire in her veins, and wakened more songs in her heart, than all the Oriental phraseology of Girgis at his best. She wished Nancy would stop talking and go to bed, for with the sudden opening of her memory to Michael Ireton's devouring eyes and the confession of his love, the woman in her was thundering at her senses, and she was ashamed!

But Nancy loved teasing. "You're blushing! I do believe he's better at it than I thought. I can only imagine him saying, 'I'm beastly fond of you, old girl.' Does he talk everlastingly about cricket and polo and golf? Do you remember the day at Lord's when you thought the umpire in his white coat was the doctor in attendance?"

They both laughed at the memory of that terrible day when Stella had tried her best to please her lover by being interested in cricket. . . .

"It's all so absurd," Nancy said, "you classing yourself with the native life here; you're not Egyptian, you're Syrian, and if you *were*, Egyptians aren't niggers!"

"No, we're not Egyptians," Stella said slowly, "we are Syrians, and Syrians are classed with the Jews and the usurers of the world generally. Our intelligence annoys rather than pleases you English . . ." she stopped abruptly . . . "We belong to the Semitic races!"

Nancy gave a breathless little gasp. . . . "Does . . . does your father *lend* money, Stella?"

"No, but Syrians *do*, and so do the Jews, because the Mohammedans can't, the Koran forbids it . . . but it doesn't prevent them borrowing." Stella smiled sarcastically.

"Are Mohammedans great gamblers, then?"

"Frightful."

"Does Girgis lend money?" Nancy spoke timidly.

"No, *rather* not; he does all he can to prevent young Egyptians from borrowing money . . . they mortgage their cotton-crops year after year . . . the money all goes on the 'fleshpots of Egypt' . . . on the very things that the Prophet forbade. The young Egyptians who live in cities care for nothing but dress, horse-racing, and gambling . . . the Jews and Syrians are hated because they are careful and have made big fortunes by lending money at high interest to foolish gamblers . . . the Egyptians would always borrow money somehow and somewhere!"

"But moneylending is horrid . . ." Nancy shivered . . . "I'm glad Girgis never does it, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am glad," Stella said, "and thank God father abhors it."

Both girls were silent for a few moments.

"You see what I mean," Stella said. "The regeneration of Egypt, must be effected by elevating the standard of womanhood." She paused. . . . "We must raise these women even if we awaken them to suffering. I know they are happier as they are, but they have slept long enough, poor things."

"Do you think they are really happier as they are?" Nancy asked. "Why?"

"*I* think they are, for they are unconscious of their unhappiness . . . the enlightened woman is not. They don't know that they are ignorant, and filthy, and idle, and not fit to be the mothers of any race of men."

"Then, dear," Nancy said, "why, oh, why waken them?"

"Why wake them?" Stella said. "Because every one must suffer for a big cause, and surely the regeneration of their nation is a big enough one . . . the ancient Egyptians never could have been as great a race if their women had

been as the women are to-day . . . we know they weren't ; history tells us that they weren't ; the pictures on the walls show us that they weren't . . . the Egyptian mother of to-day is a disgrace to her land . . . why the men are as decent as they are is a marvel."

"The Koran," Nancy said: "the men can read the Koran."

"Oh, the Egyptian youth of to-day pays very little attention to the Koran . . . to escape military service he goes through a course of education at El-Azhar, the Mohammedan University, where he has to study the Koran, but when he is through his course he shakes it off. . . . El-Azhar," Stella said dreamily, "is the most beautiful thing in Cairo. You must go there."

"I'd love to," Nancy said.

"El-Azhar," Stella said, "is like the Vatican: it's a vast, mediæval organisation which appeals to the emotions and annoys the intellect. When I walk through its ancient courts full of devout students, apparently lost to the world in their search after Truth, I hate all modern progress, I loathe the idea of changing in any way this beautiful seat of learning which has gone on since . . . long before England saw the Normans." Again she paused. "But if you were to go through the 'fish market' at night, as I did disguised as a native woman once, you would want to open the gates of El-Azhar to even the most vulgar inroads of modernity . . . you would want to let in the fresh air of progress . . . you would want to let in the idea that women, as the mothers of all nations, must hold an even higher position in the land than the men; that, grafted on to the Prophet's teachings, must come the teachings of the world of to-day."

"Stella, why don't you teach the women these things? You could do a lot of good by public speaking." Nancy had heard of the "fish market."

"I want to, but it's so difficult; more than I can tell you," Stella said.

"I suppose it would be difficult," Nancy said.

"There are so many people to consider: there's father . . ." She was going to say "and Vernon," but refrained . . . "and even mother, I believe she would . . ."

"Would your father object? Really I don't believe he would."

"Yes, I think so . . . Not that he would think it wrong, but you must always remember that at the back of everything . . ." she hesitated . . . "father *is* an Eastern, and he knows the vile Oriental mind . . . he knows the sort of things Arabs say and think about

women who do anything in public, and he simply can't bear the idea of even the vilest and most ignorant of them *thinking* horrible thoughts about his own wife and child."

"I see," Nancy said; "it's awfully difficult."

"Father is hated almost as much as if he was an Englishman by all the different sects, except perhaps by the 'Independent Egyptian Party,' which is repesented by the highest Coptic people; and I think he's respected by many of the influential and wealthy Moslems, whose aim is 'Representative Government in Egypt irrespective of race or religion,' because they know that he is *not* self-interested, that like them, his first wish is for Egypt."

"Does Girgis belong to that party?"

"He goes much farther; he has many sympathies with the 'Nationalists.' He used to belong to the Party of the People, as the moderate Nationalists are called . . . but you must remember that Girgis is awfully young; father is old enough to have seen the days of Turkish oppression."

"How old *is* Girgis?"

"Just my age . . . not twenty-three."

Nancy laughed. "Good heavens! Stella, he's only a boy."

"You must remember that most native 'boys' of his age are married men and fathers. Twenty-three in an Egyptian is equvialent to thirty-three and more in an Englishman. Boys have all the independence of men: in Egypt they have often homes of their own at sixteen."

"I'm sorry for Girgis," Nancy said. "You've given him a soul: he's bound to suffer."

Stella did not pretend not to understand what she meant, but said sadly: "I don't know how much he feels, I don't begin to understand him; he likes me, I know, but how deeply or how lastingly it is impossible for us to judge. His life is unusual, so his feelings may be different from the ordinary Egyptian's."

"One can't fathom him," Nancy said, "but anyhow, you have given him a new standard of womanhood; he can never fall in love with an ignorant Copt after having loved you, and that's rather sad for him."

"He never would have 'fallen in love,' my dear . . . He would have married in due time and had sons, by Allah!"

"And after all that's man's chief end," Nancy said.

"The Moslem makes no pretence that it is not," Stella said. "Sentiment is a Western idiosyncrasy: the East keeps sentiment for outside the walls of the harem."

"And all his great aspirations, his theories?"

"Oh, about them he's quite in earnest; he is full of sentiment and emotion for Egypt. Besides, cotton and

the growing of it interests all native-born Egyptians; it's in their blood, like wool is in Australians. He's deep in the great problem now of how to *mature* Egyptian cotton earlier in the season, before the boll-worm has time to ruin the crops. . . . The boll-worm does its worst in September. The great question which is puzzling Egyptian cotton-experts is: Should Egyptian farmers introduce more American cotton into the country? . . . it produces a heavier head of cotton and is less affected by the boll-worm on account of its early ripening . . . or should they stick to the superior Egyptian plant, which is the only cotton in the market which will mercerise satisfactorily? Egyptian cotton fetches a far higher price in the market . . . at the same time two or three successive years of bad boll-worm produce disastrous results. Girgis is, of course, all for preserving the Egyptian plant, and I think he's right, for it has qualities no other cotton possesses . . . dear boy, he's setting his whole mind to work on the problem of the boll-worm . . . if his heart has other interests . . . He's awfully interested in all the experiments of the agricultural society; he's working with them privately, as well as on his own farm."

"How splendid!" Nancy said. "I wish he would tell me all about these things . . . they are much more interesting than foolish compliments, pretty as they are!"

"Poor fellow, he's only used to the vapid minds of the native women, who never concern themselves about anything that matters; but if you once start him he'll talk cotton and boll-worm until you will know all there is to be known on the subject. You see how well informed I am."

"Good-night, dear," Nancy said; "I suppose we must go to bed . . . but you're so interesting . . . I'll try my hand at boll-worm with Girgis."

"Nancy," Stella said, "you look such a fresh wild rose in this dry land; but everything gets mummified sooner or later, so put some grease on that baby skin of yours, or it will be burnt to a cinder."

"All right," Nancy said; "I don't want to lose my one asset."

CHAPTER XXI

THEY awoke next morning to find the world hot and sunless; a vapour bath enveloped their small lake-dwelling; the air was so stifling that Nancy was almost prostrate. It was her first experience of the damp heat of a warm country.

On a sunless day Egypt is as ugly as it really is . . . on

a day of dazzling sunshine, it is as beautiful as it really is not. So Nancy said as she stood at the door of their canvas room and looked out upon the mist-enveloped lake and along the dusty, breathless road which stretched towards the desert.

Suddenly she called to Stella, who was talking to Girgis in the room behind her. "Oh, both of you come quickly! A horse has bolted and is tearing down the road; a man is holding on to the reins and trying to stop it, but he's being dragged along horribly . . . quick, come and look!"

Stella and Girgis ran to her. As they reached the opening Nancy fled down the outside staircase, which took her to the ground, the other two at her heels. By this time the horse with the lorry had almost reached the iron gate and the two white posts which did duty as an entrance to the domains of the lake-inn. As there were no hedges or dividing lines to mark the enclosure of the property from the surrounding desert, the gate was merely an ornament. As the beast swung round the posts the man lost his footing and was flung on the ground, and one of the horse's fore-feet passed over his right hand. The girls heard a scream of pain from the wounded Arab; the next instant a labourer appeared and got hold of the horse by the bridle: it had slackened its pace after the collision with the gate-post. The thrown man was lying in a huddled-up heap on the path.

Stella and Nancy hurried towards him; Girgis was quietly returning to their hotel when Stella called to him: "Girgis, the man's hurt—didn't you hear him scream? Send some one to help him, or come and help him yourself." Girgis stood still and let Stella run on. When she reached the man she asked him where he was hurt; he was groaning and moaning as though in mortal agony. He stretched out a crushed hand: it was streaming with blood and the palm was disgustingly bruised. As he rolled over on his side he displayed a nasty cut on his temple . . . Stella turned to Girgis for advice: he was not there! He was speaking to the Arab holding the restive horse . . . she heard him asking "had he brought the chickens he had ordered for lunch, and the fruit?"

Stella was furious. "Girgis!" she cried, "didn't you hear me? The poor creature is in agony."

Girgis sauntered towards her unconcernedly. "Leave him," he said; "he's only moaning because you are there. Come away."

Nancy's eyes flashed with anger—she could not trust herself to speak. She was holding the fellah's hard-worked, slender hand in her soft fingers. "Here, Stella," she said,

"make a wad of my handkerchief and put it in the palm of his hand, and then tie your own closely round it . . . yes, tightly, that's right. . . ."

Stella did as Nancy told her, and when the wound was bound up as well as it could be with two little pieces of cambric and lace, Stella urged the man to sit up, to try if he could walk. He did so for a moment, but rolled over again, moaning pitifully.

"Let's go to the inn," Nancy said, "and send some one to him. The cut on his head ought to be washed: the flies are getting at it." Nancy had been keeping the pests off the wound with her fly-switch.

Before they left him Stella took four Egyptian shillings out of her purse and gave them to the man. "You can't do any work for a few days," she said; "that will buy you some food. I will send some one from the inn to look after your wounds: turn over on your face again and keep the flies off."

The man did as he was bid.

Girgis was still talking to the Arab who had caught the horse. Stella passed him without a word or a glance, and so did Nancy. He hastened after them. "The boat is ready when you wish to go."

"Thank you," Stella said, very coldly, "I must first see that some one attends to that poor creature's head and hand; it's bleeding horribly."

"It is not at all necessary," Girgis said casually.

"I think it is, and so does Nancy."

"As you wish," he said.

Stella was exasperated at his brutality.

Girgis turned to look at the man: he was walking away, his groaning had ceased; he was evidently not seriously hurt, judging by the manner in which he was holding himself. "Did I not tell you that he was only groaning because you were there?" Girgis looked pleased.

"But he is really hurt," Nancy said; "his hand is crushed and there is a big cut on his head."

Girgis was not listeing—his interest was centred on an automatic native well they were passing at the moment, which he had induced the landlord of the inn to purchase. He left the girls to inspect it. Automatic *sakiyas* were a great feature on Girgis's estates. Stella thought them very ugly, and regretted the innovation: they were all very well in a land where labour had to be saved, but in Egypt she considered them an unnecessary substitute for the old, picturesque Nile-wells.

When Girgis was out of hearing Stella turned to Nancy: "What do you think of that?"

"I think it is the ancient Egyptian showing its head, he's too nice otherwise to be utterly devoid of pity."

"I'm convinced he thinks that the fellahin can't feel—they're little more than flies to him."

"But of course they do feel, else why should he be working for their progress?" questioned Nancy, whose eyes were following the now quickly moving figure of the Arab. Against the pale sand of the desert and the low scrub of pink-tipped tamarisks and dark-leaved castor-oil plants, his cotton jebba looked as blue as the necklace of mummy beads Stella was wearing.

"Of course they feel," Stella said, "but they are philosophers as well as children, and the worst of it is that the man understands Girgis and his brutality far better than us and our sympathy; he probably respects him more."

Girgis was so totally unconscious of having disgusted the two girls with his callous behaviour, that he attributed their silence in the boat to the excessive heat.

They were in a huge boat manned by three brown Arabs who were pushing their way through a narrow channel overhung with a dese scrub of low-branching tamarisks . . . the heat was stifling, and here and there the boat stuck on the channel's muddy bottom. Then the men had to wade waist-deep in the water to push her off. Before they got into the water they had taken off their long galabeahs and dexterously converted their red handkerchiefs into loin-cloths—otherwise they were naked.

When they at last got out into the open lake the men climbed back into the boat, but there was not much more air to boast of, and they could scarcely see a hundred yards in front of them. The two girls and Mrs. Lekejian lapsed into silence, and Girgis sat like a carved image in the end of the boat. Long before they got to the other side of the lake, the unanimous wish was to return to their comfortable quarters in the hotel.

Their return journey was made in dead silence.

When they reached their inn they were amazed to find Nicolas there. He said he had given himself a holiday, as he was feeling rather slack. He had spent the night in the hotel in the Fayyum. They were all delighted to see him, and Nancy said, "Now *I* shall have some one to flirt with: Girgis would like to recite Persian poems to Stella all day long if I was not here, but he has too good taste to speak in a language I can't understand, and the only English poems he knows are nursery rhymes."

Nicolas laughed because of the girl's infectious high spirits and love of mischief. "But it takes *two* to flirt. Supposing I can't or *won't*?" he said gravely.

"I'll teach you if you can't, and if you won't, what's the use of your coming?"

"What is flirting, in your opinion?"

"Oh, having a ripping time! Two people liking each other well enough to pretend they like each other a lot more, and not really liking each other well enough to have a a bad pain if they don't!"

"That's just what I thought," Nicolas said, "and it's a game in which I can't see myself the winner."

"Well, what are we going to do if we don't flirt?" I didn't come to Al Fayyum to read books!"

Girgis, who had come into the room at that moment, pulled out a pack of cards from his pocket. "Bridge!" he said, with the solemnity of an oracle. "Will you like to play the game of bridge, Miss Nancy?"

Stella consulted with Nancy. "Shall we play? It seems so rotten to be playing bridge at Lake Moeris, yet what are we to do?"

"When there ain't a-going to be no lake, why not try to forget it?" Nicolas said.

"That's true," Nancy said, "and if Nicolas won't flirt," she rebuked him with soft eyes, "perhaps he'll condescend to play—to come down to my level and amuse my small mind."

They sat down to a game of bridge while Mrs. Lekejian wrote a letter to her husband. Girgis played an excellent game—he was Stella's partner. Nancy and Nicolas both were much stronger than Stella, who had no natural instinct for games, but was clever enough to learn anything she set her mind to, and Girgis felt frightfully happy at finding himself for once in a position to help her and at the same time show off his own quickness.

Occasionally Mrs. Lekejian looked up from her writing to speak or smile to one of the quartette, and each time she did so Nancy's fair hair struck her as strangely incongruous beside the scarlet tarbush of her nephew and the dark glossy hair of her son and daughter. Once, as she raised her eyes, she saw Nancy and Nicolas looking for a card some one had dropped—their heads were close together under the table. She could see Nicolas's hand rest on Nancy's for just one moment before the girl raised a flushed face to the level of the table. As she did so she said:

"Stella, he's flirting with me—he's better than his word." A burst of laughter came from all four, and Nicolas turned scarlet. "Don't you call holding hands flirting, Mrs. Lekejian?" . . . Nancy had risen from her seat and flown to Mrs. Lekejian's side. Flinging herself

on her knees she said, "What will you give me if I make your grave son really flirt enough to forget how young he is, and stop being grown up?"

Mrs. Lekejian pretended to whip the laughing girl, who flew back to Nicolas. "If you are so grave you will die an early death," she said, "or be put in the museum, or somewhere worse."

"What do you want me to do?" he said.

"Amuse your guest," she said, bowing with mock gravity before him.

"How shall I amuse her?"

"Oh! don't ask her how, just begin; tell her stories—naughty ones if you don't know any good ones, I don't mind—only I must be amused or interested." She sighed despondently."

Stella laughed; she knew Nancy's fits of teasing too well to do anything else.

Nicolas sat down beside her. "I'll try," he said, "to tell you a story."

Their voices instinctively fell into lower tones. "What's it about?" she said.

"About a little boy who played with fire."

"Has it a moral?" she said, pouting absurdly.

"Yes . . . all good stories have morals."

"But I don't want a *good* story."

"And I don't know any bad ones."

"Make one up," she said; "or I'll ask Girgis to tell me one—he's sure to know lots."

"Don't you want to hear what became of the bad little boy?"

"Oh! was the boy bad!" her face mimicked excitement.

"Yes, *very* bad."

"Then that will do," she said. "I don't mind the story being good if the boy was very bad. Why was he very bad."

"Because he had been warned not to play with fire."

"Who had warned him?"

"A lady called 'Experience.'"

"Where did he meet her?"

"When he was idling instead of working."

"What did she say to him?"

"That if he played with fire it would burn him, and it would hurt."

"Go on," Nancy said. "Did the boy play with it?"

"At first there wasn't any fire," he said, "only two tiny sticks; but the boy knew that if the two sticks came too close together there would be fire, but he couldn't resist the fun of making just little tiny sparks and flashes

. . . tiny ones at first, and then bigger and bigger until they burst into a big bright flame, and then he couldn't stop them burning. They burnt him frightfully and hurt his hands horribly, and still he couldn't help holding them ; the flame fascinated him almost more than the pain hurt . . ." he stopped.

"And then ? " Nancy said.

"And then . . . well then . . ." he said, "there was nothing more, nothing at all, except the awful pain and the memory of all that the lady called 'Experience' had told him."

"Do you think that little boy will ever play with fire again? " she said.

"I think not," he said ; "he sticks so hard at his work now, and never even looks at matches."

"Do you know the little boy ? " she said gravely.

"I am his most intimate friend."

"Should I like him ? " she said.

"I think not," he said, "he is too grave for you."

"You think, like Girgis, that I am only 'sweet to the nostrils like orange flowers.' "

He laughed. "Did Girgis say that ? "

"Yes, and much more ; he flirts better than you."

"I don't flirt at all."

"And you will not introduce me to the little boy ? "

He shook his head.

"You are afraid he would play with the matches again."

"Yes, I am afraid." He looked into her half-laughing eyes. "Yes, I am afraid ; I think you are so eager for fun that you could not resist tempting the little boy to play with the matches, and I think that you are so clever that you would drop yours before they burnt your fingers."

"You think I am heartless," she said, "because I am not always serious ? "

"I don't think," he said ; "what you really are does not signify to me so long as . . ."

"Then you are rude."

"It is better to be rude than foolish, in my case at least."

"I don't think so ; I want to be friends—we are almost brother and sister."

He laughed. "Oh ! very nearly."

"Well, I'm going to be Stella's sister-in-law."

Nicolas frowned. "Poor Stella."

"Why poor Stella ! Because I am to be her sister-in-law ? "

"No," he said quickly, "that almost reconciles me to it." His eyes were so tender that Nancy blushed.

"Then why poor Stella?"

"Because I think the whole thing's a mistake."

Stella and Girgis had left the room, and Mrs. Lekejian could not hear them speaking from where she sat.

"You do not like Vernon; I felt that the first night I arrived."

"I shouldn't dislike him if he was not going to marry Stella."

"You think he is not good enough for her . . . I agree with you." Their eyes met: Nancy's laughing ones had become dark and grave. "But who *is* good enough for Stella? interesting enough, I mean?"

"Vernon could be if he did not think himself too good."

"Oh, you surely don't think he does!" Nancy gave a little cry. "He's horribly narrow, I know, and has an absurdly narrow outlook upon things he's unaccustomed to, but he couldn't think he was too good for Stella . . . why, he used to tell us at home that he felt ashamed of himself for having asked her to marry him."

"He doesn't think that since he came out here?"

"Nicolas," Nancy said, very seriously, "you exaggerate all that sort of thing, you are far too sensitive."

"I have learnt my lesson."

"But surely," she said, "it's almost as narrow of you to think that all English people think alike."

"Perhaps it is," he said, "but anyhow, the fact's unalterable."

"The English out here are hateful," Nancy said. Tears had filled her eyes, for Nicolas's voice was lifeless.

"They aren't altogether to be blamed," he said; "some of them have tried to be friends with the best of the natives, but they get disgusted . . . they give it up."

Nancy was silent. Then, as though speaking her thoughts aloud, she said: "The mother of the most intellectual king of all Egyptian history . . . the great reformer who lived more than two thousand years before his time, was a Syrian, so Stella says . . . you are Syrians."

"A despised race," he said, "because we have the business instincts of the Jews and their ability to outlast persecution."

"You are bitter."

He glanced at her. "Who wouldn't be . . .?" He paused. "I am never so bitter as when I'm speaking to you."

"Why?" she asked—"why, when you are speaking to me of all people, who sees no barrier between your race and her own—why with me, Nicolas?"

"Because," he said slowly, "because, as Girgis said,

you are sweet to my nostrils as a wild rose; that is why."

"Oh, now you flirt!" she said nervously, "but Girgis said 'orange blossom.'" She looked at him mischievously. A deep flush spread over her neck and face when she saw the wound her words had inflicted.

"I was not flirting," he said coldly: "you were annoyed because I did not take you seriously, and now, because I betrayed a deeper understanding of myself to you, you turn everything into banter."

"I am so sorry," she said, "but I thought you were teasing me. I did not mean to hurt." She laid her soft fingers on his wrist: "Don't be cross, Nicolas."

He drew his hand away and rose from his seat. "Little English rose," he said gently, "don't prick me with your thorns." He turned and left her.

CHAPTER XXII

The next morning the glamour of Egypt had returned; for all that had been barren ugliness was now turned, by the glory of Amon Ra, into a vision of magic beauty. They were intoxicated with the mere joy of living. Mrs. Lekejian was happy in seeing her two children almost as gay and light-hearted as Nancy, whose bubbling vitality was so magnetic that it acted like an intoxicant upon the sensitive temperament of her two more seriously minded companions.

A picnic to see the ruins of the famous labyrinth and the pyramid of Amen-em-hat III., and his daughter Ptah-nefert, was to be the order of the day. They lay about five miles out, in the desert, from the town of Medinat-al Fayyum. . . . Girgis was to ride on his Arab mare while the others drove in his comfortable carriage as far as the good roads of the irrigated country would allow them. After that they were to pick up donkeys and ride across the roadless desert. It was necessary for them first to return to Medinat-al Fayyum, as Girgis had to attend to some business in the town.

Girgis was very excited, and talked often about a portion of the drive where, he assured Nancy, the scenery was exactly like Scotland, for which country he had a romantic admiration. He had seen pictures of Highland scenery on postcards.

On their way back to the city of Al Fayyum the scenery was exactly the same as it had been two days before, for Egypt, with its infinite variety of light and shade and its

extraordinary mixture of human types, is in its essentials always the same: its procession of black-veiled women, like funeral mourners, never draws to an end: its strings of obstinate buffaloes, moving slowly through the desert sand, never alter their grudging pace; its groups of nimble-footed asses carrying stately riders, whose turbaned heads bring to mind the prophet-law-givers of ancient days, never slacken their willing trot; the mud villages, with low houses and high pigeon-towers, never change: the saints tombs, with white domes and dark palm trees, repeat themselves with the same unfailing regularity.

When Girgis reached his property he often cantered away across the country on his exquisite mare; after a little while he would be back at their side again and ready to tell them all that he could about the country. Upon things agricultural he was a walking encyclopædia of information.

The third time he bounded off Nancy asked Stella if he was bored by riding so slowly by their carriage?

Stella smiled. "Oh, no; but Girgis is a very level-headed young man, he never forgets the main object of an Egyptian."

Nancy looked at her with questioning eyes.

"Cotton," Stella said: "cotton is to the Egyptian farmer what wool is to the Australian."

Stella nodded her head towards the richly irrigated country as she spoke. "Some fellahin are ploughing with camels and a wooden plough over there . . . can you see their blue gâlabeahs and the camels' heads? Girgis is paying them a surprise visit . . . he's going to see how many of the men are sleeping instead of working: the last time he left us the sâkiya boy was playing dominoes with one of the ploughmen, and the ox-wheel was standing still at the irrigation well."

Nancy's practical mind had a respect for any one who could so admirably combine business with pleasure as Girgis did, and also be so unfailingly ornamental. When he returned to their side he looked very stern.

"What's the matter, R.G.?" Nancy asked. (R.G. stood for "Rameses the Great," which had been her pet name for him from the first day she met him.) "How many slaves have you bastinadoed? How many hands have you cut off?" She raised herself on her seat and looked across his mare's neck. "Have you no heads to show? . . . how very tame! . . ."

"I should very much have enjoyed cutting off two hands," he said sternly, "and I think Lord Minton would have thanked me if I had sent them to him." He muttered

something in Arab which Stella recognised as a popular native curse: some one was to have deformed sons and some one else was to be eaten by flies and his wife was to be barren.

"Do tell us what has happened," Nancy said, "it will help to entertain us. . . ."

"You would not understand," he said; "it would not interest women."

Stella laughed. "Remember, Girgis, you are not speaking to native women."

"Give our combined intelligences a chance, R.G.; Englishwomen are awfully inquisitive."

"It is very simple to *you*"—he addressed Nicolas—"you know how much harm late berseem crops do to the cotton crops, and how much I have done to try to prevent the farmers from cutting berseem after April; I won't allow any berseem to be sown close to my cotton on my own land at any time."

"I think even Stella knows something about that. Lord Minton is taking very strong measures to stop the short-sightedness of the natives in that respect," said Nicolas. His eyes addressed Nancy.

"I don't know anything about it," she said simply, "but tell me, if you please." She laughed as she used Girgis's old expression.

"During the early stages of the cotton-growing, up to the end of June, the boll-worm can find nothing to live upon in the cotton fields, and so it goes to the berseem crops and puts in time until the cotton is to its taste. . . . The natives foolishly plant their berseem quite close up to the cotton crop, so as not to waste any land. If there was no berseem for their worms to feed upon they would die of starvation and want of moisture."

"Then *why* do the natives plant it so close? Isn't cotton far more valuable than berseem?"

"Yes, much, but berseem grows quicker and so gives a ready return for their money. Two or three berseem crops can be grown in one season, but only one cotton crop."

Girgis burst in: "I pay nearly all the working expenses of my farm off berseem and other light crops; my cotton is clear profit."

"Then why doesn't berseem hurt *your* cotton?"

"Because I cut my last crop of berseem before it can hurt the cotton—the boll-worm does not do its work so early; and I never keep a berseem crop standing for seed anywhere near my cotton crops, or water it after a certain date."

"I see," Nancy said. "But why should the natives

be such fools ? . . . they have been growing cotton ever since the Nile ran through Egypt, practically."

"The poor things try to squeeze in another crop," Nicolas said, "because of their greed for ready money. The greater part of the small growers have gambled away their cotton crops almost as soon as the green shoots have shown above the ground."

"Is the Berseem Act one of Lord Minton's reforms ?" Stella asked. "He strikes at the root of evils. . . . Instead of introducing new cottons which are not so valuable as the old ones, how much wiser to make it illegal to cut berseem and sow it after a certain date !"

"He has not got so far as that yet," Nicolas said, "it is not *illegal* . . . the fellahin wouldn't stand that all at once."

Girgis gave his mirthless laugh. "He is much wiser," he said; "he has ordered the Muduirs to *persuade* the fellahin not to do it."

The real interpretation of the word *persuade* was not hard to guess by the tone of Girgis's voice.

"How do you persuade your men ?" Nancy asked. "Are you a Mudir ?"

"No, I am not a Mudir—I am a Christian."

They all laughed at his veiled sarcasm except Nancy, who did not understand it.

Mrs. Lekejian shook her head. "Oh, Girgis, Girgis !" she said in a kindly tone, "is that the only reason why you are not a Mudir ?"

"That is why I can never be one," he said, "while Egypt is governed as she is at present, yet who knows ? . . ." his eyes gleamed in his sun-browned face like moving onyx beads . . . "But I am a land-owner, Miss Nancy, and when I let a small piece of land to a tenant farmer last year, it was laid down in the agreement that no berseem was to be sown within a certain distance from the cotton, after a certain date, and that no crop of berseem was to stand for seed after a certain date."

"Well ?" Nancy said.

"Well," Girgis said, "that contract has been broken." He looked at his riding-whip significantly. . . . "If I had done what I should have liked to have done I should have sent his two hands to Lord Minton, as you so wisely suggested."

"If they could have been taught by the cutting off of hands they would surely have learnt long ago," Stella said.

"If only the Prophet had laid it down in the Koran," Nancy said . . . "It seems to me that the Koran is the

only thing they ever will obey ; a new and enlarged edition should be brought out."

"You think they obey it," Stella said, "but!" she shrugged her shoulders . . . "well, the Prophet forbade the drinking of strong wines, but he did not mention whisky and liqueurs; even music was forbidden, yet the most devout fellah sings whenever he gets the chance, and almost every wealthy Mohammedan has a music gallery in his house . . . and so with dancing—they adore it, and it was most strictly forbidden."

"On the old caravan roads," Nicolas said, "you often meet strolling singers who entertain the travellers round the camp fires at night!"

Nancy's eyes sparkled. "How I should love to get into the real desert life! I want dancers, and fortune-tellers, and snake-charmers, and jugglers, and story-tellers, and buffoons in their proper environment. Can't we go?"

Mrs. Lekejian whispered to her : "They generally become so improper, my dear, that if you understand what they are saying no lady can bear it : that is why they were put down in the streets of Cairo. The people love lewd jests and low fun so much that they won't pay the performers any money until they pass all bounds of decency."

Girgis had left them again. They saw him riding beside a steam plough which was doing its work in its rapid modern way. When he returned he told Nicolas the time it took to plough an acre of land with the new machine compared to doing it with the camel and wooden plough of classic days. Nancy noticed that all his ploughing was not done in this rapid fashion.

"You have to consider the fellahin," he said. "What would they do?"

Nancy's eyes softened : for once Girgis had shown that he was human. "I forgot that," she said. "What would they do? Is it right to retard progress for the sake of employing human beings who are little better than animals?"

"Socialists would solve that problem in their own way," Nicolas said, "but fortunately Girgis is still a considerate master rather than a theoretical reformer."

They had left the agricultural land of the oasis, with its wide roads and rich green crops, and were descending into a rocky valley, hedged on either side by a beautiful undergrowth of natural wild plants. This was Girgis's Scotland. In Egypt, greenness and luxurious vegetation always means abundant irrigation. The road from the city of Medinat-al Fayyum to Lake Moeris was one of the wide roads for agricultural transport common in the Fayyum,

so, when they left their carriage at the point where Girgis told them they were to meet their donkeys, a new experience awaited Nancy; they were to ride across the roadless desert to the pyramids of Hawara.

Their donkeys were splendid animals, and the best and quietest of them was given to Nancy. It stood as high as a small pony, and was as white and smooth of skin as her own suède glove. On its breast there were necklaces of blue beads hanging, with silver charms and amulets of every description, cowrie shells, and passages from the Koran rolled up in little red leather cases, and lumps of sacred soil from Mecca. The ass looked like a beast got up for an Eastern fancy bazaar.

Girgis, with Stella and her mother, led the way: how Nancy could not imagine, for in her eyes the desert held as few landmarks as the open sea; but they never seemed to have the slightest doubt about their direction, and the donkeys ambled on as though they were going to market with native women on their backs. But Nancy felt very different from the placid native women who grow fat through indolence of mind and Oriental compliance with the will of Allah, for the air was electric and her senses were intoxicated with the spell of Egypt. Everything she had ever heard or read about the desert fled from her mind at the actual realisation of its wonder, and she was more nearly able to comprehend the infinity of God than she had been before. In the desert God is in the light and in the silence, He is the Lord of the Sweet Wind; so much so that Nancy, with her practical mind and irrepressible modernity, felt the Mystery of the Sublime. In the desert man's place in the world is lost.

Nicolas did not disturb the reverie into which his usually talkative and amusing companion had fallen. He was riding a few steps behind her, partly for the pleasure of watching the natural grace of her seat in the saddle, and partly because the girl's donkey persisted in leading the way. She looked such a childish figure under her long veil of dark blue, which she wore right down to her knees, that Nicolas longed to hold her in his arms as one holds a child that one loves. Nancy's violet eyes could not bear the fierce glare of the pitiless sun as well as Stella's dark ones, which, like her own, had long been accustomed to the half-light of England. Stella wore a green gauze veil only half as thick as Nancy's. Nicolas and Girgis did not ever wear blue glasses. To Nancy it seemed incredible that any mortal eyes could bear the terrific glare. Besides, the thick veil saved her fair skin from the hot air, which burnt like the breath of an oven. Wearing it as long as

she did, right down to her knees, prevented flies getting under it, and as it flapped about it created a little draught.

After they had been riding for some time in the intimate revealing silence, little towns appeared on the far horizon, little towns with white minarets and green palm trees; and evidently there was water, for Nancy could see the white wings of sailing boats, like birds on the edge of the desert.

"I had no idea," she said to Nicolas, "there were so many towns in the real desert; I thought only Bedouins and various sorts of tent-dwellers lived on its barren waste away from the Nile . . . but there must be water there . . ." she was nodding towards the far-distant town. . . . "What are we coming to?"

Nicolas smiled. "I'm afraid it would take you a very long time to come to that city," he said; "about as long as it took the boy to reach the end of the rainbow, where he went to find the buried treasure. . . . I doubt if any of the inhabitants of the Medinat-al Fayyum have ever been any nearer to it than we are now'

"Why? Is there something sacred about it? Is it a forbidden city? The Moslems have many forbidden cities, haven't they?"

"It's a city forbidden to all mortals."

"Do explain!" Nancy said impatiently. "What do any but mortals want with mosques and houses and boats? . . . It's growing clearer and clearer—how lovely it is!"

"No mortal has ever trodden its streets, no prayer has ever been offered up by human lips from those white mosques, no call to prayer cried from those minarets."

Nancy made her donkey halt until Nicolas was by her side; her questioning eyes met his. "Do you understand, Miss Hedge-rose, do you realise that at last you have seen a 'mirage' . . . a real desert mirage—that that city over there doesn't exist at all."

Nancy's expression was one of wonder, of incredulity. "Do you really mean it? Am I to believe that, though we both see them, there are no real houses over there, no water with boats on it, no palm trees?"

Nicolas shook his head. "No, none at all."

"Then I suppose, you will be saying that there is no me! . . ."

"No, I won't," he said, "though I often try to wish there wasn't . . . do you know why?" He put his hand on the pommel of her saddle. "Of course you know," he said a little bitterly, "though, like all women, you will pretend you don't."

"Because I 'rag' and waste your time?"

Her eyes were not turned to his, and through her dark veil he could not see that the tint of her cheeks had turned to crimson.

Nicolas lifted his hand from her saddle. "Yes, sweet Nancy, you are dangerously real, as real and living to me every minute of the day as I am myself—even when we are miles apart. You are far more real than that great tomb of Amen-em-hat, which was placed there two thousand years before Christ introduced His strange theories into the East and gave the world a new religion to fight over, a Saviour to die for, and new ideals to live for." He paused . . . "Behind it lie the ruins of the famous Labyrinth."

Nicolas had spoken of these things to detract from the embarrassment his first words might have caused . . . he was angry with himself for having allowed his feelings to unbridle his tongue—

"What is the Labyrinth? Stella talked about it last night as though I ought to understand all about it."

"The Labyrinth is the name given to the huge city which grew up round the pyramid of Hawara, while the king (Amen-em-hat III.) was building it for his own tomb when he was dead . . . these pyramids took so long to build and decorate that cities used to grow up around them during their construction. They died away when the king was buried, and another city grew up round the next pyramid that the new king was having raised for himself."

"I see," Nancy said, but she spoke absently, for her eyes were once more on the mirage. "I never imagined mirages were things that *every one* could see at the same time," she said dreamily. "I thought they were optical delusions which highly sensitive and imaginative people saw . . . but *you* see that town, and *I* see it, and I suppose all the others see it?"

Nicolas laughed at her consternation over the unreal. "And it doesn't exist after all! . . . it really doesn't; it's like our happiness," he said reflectively.

"Oh, don't say that! Happiness is real when you feel like this—aren't *you* happy this morning?"

"Yes, just now, too happy," he said, and his eyes told her the reason why . . . "but will it last, like the king's tomb, or will it fade away when the sun goes down like your mirage city?" Something in his voice conveyed more than his words.

"If happiness lasted for ever I suppose we should get awfully sick of it."

"Perhaps you're right: unhappiness is like rain, it

softens humanity. . . . People who have never known real happiness can't sympathise with a girl like you who can be happy through the mere joy of living—isn't that so?"

"Yes, but I really believe that for ordinary mortals there is more danger in too much happiness than in too much suffering."

"It seems to me that even you must have suffered! Yet who would have imagined it? But then you are amazingly sensible too, and you don't look it. He laughed affectionately.

"I don't know what I *look*, but I feel a walking monument of common, everyday sense. . . . I'm not a bit temperamental. . . . I think that's the word used nowadays, isn't it, to express people like Stella? I'm so sanely ordinary beside her, when I'm old and fat I shall be dreadful."

"Why should you ever be fat?" Nicolas made no flattering rejoinder.

"Because the women of our family *grow* fat, the men stay thin . . . we're like the hedge-roses truly enough: when the bloom goes off we turn into round, red, prosaic food for the birds. . . . I shall be absolutely commonplace both in mind and appearance, not one scrap different from all the other little round, red-faced women who knock the bottom out of the most charming illusions by their bump of common sense."

"It was I who knocked the bottom out of your desert city, wasn't it? Will you forgive me?"

Nancy laughed as her beast bore her swiftly away from her companion's side; it was a gentle beast, with nice manners, but it did not like being passed, and Nicolas's donkey had been trying to gain the lead. "You're yet got to prove that your words are true," she called out; "anyhow, *I'm* not going to let the mirage of my happiness fade away at sunset."

After a good long scamper across the open desert her donkey halted abruptly in front of a native hut whose small windows were jealously guarded with wooden blinds to keep out the sun. The door was shut, to exclude the hot air; but the moment the animal stopped it was opened and a stately Arab salaamed in front of Nancy. Nancy had not been aware of the tremendous temperature they had been riding in—for the dry heat of the desert is curiously deceptive—until she entered the cool hut, whose gracious shade and air of spotless cleanliness made it seem an earthly paradise. The Arab servant, whose beautifully rolled turban and long grey silk robe endowed him with the air and dignity of an Old Testament prophet,

helped her to dismount; he next relieved her of her veil and riding-gloves.

With a sigh of content she looked round her and inspected the building: the one large room, with its mud floor and mud walls, seemed as cool as an ice-house; pleasant streaks of desert light strayed into it through the wide ribs of the wooden shutters, but the chief delight was the total absence of flies. Since sunrise the windows had been carefully closed, and so had the door. During the night the cool air had been allowed to flow in, and the flies which had got in at night had been suffocated in the Keating's powder which had been laid for them all round the window-panes. Their corpses had been buried and put out of sight long before the appearance of the master and his guests.

On a tressel table Nancy saw preparations being made for an appetising lunch . . . it had just been unpacked from a very up-to-date luncheon-basket whose little brass label was marked "Harrods." When she saw the label she could not help smiling: it took her mind back so abruptly to scenes far different from her present surroundings. Stella was in the hut beside her before the smile the label had called up had faded from her lips.

"Look," she said, "at the modernity of R.G. Your Pharaonic cousin has had his lunch-basket sent out from Harrods'. His riding-breeches came from Thomas's, his boots from Hook and Knowles, and here's a thermos flask from . . ."

The Arab handed it to her politely and without a vestige of a smile said: "From Amon-Ra, *sitt*."

"What does he mean?" Nancy asked.

"He means that they are heat-giving, like the great sun-god Amon-Ra . . ."

"Oh, stop about the ancient gods! . . . I prefer the gods of the present day, there's plenty of them and other things."

Nicolas held up a jar of *pâté de foie gras*. "Things like this, for instance," he said, "and this . . ." he threw a dessert chocolate across the table for her to catch, "and this," he laid a glass of preserved peaches on the table; "and what of this?"—a roast chicken, exquisitely cool in its wrapping of green leaves, was exhibited.

"I didn't know I was so hungry or so greedy until I saw these delicacies, did you? Isn't it all ripping?" She turned to smile upon Girgis, but he was busy outside the hut seeing that the saddles were removed from the donkeys before the beasts took their midday siesta. The saddles had to be taken out of the sun, or they would be

too hot to sit upon later on. Nancy's eyes were turned to Nicolas again : " When I saw this basket I had a terrible wave of depression ; it's passing off now."

" Why depression ? "

" That label called up all sorts of boring visions in my mind ; it reminded me that there *is* a London of shops and blouses and gowns and things." She sighed. . . . " I'd love to live in the desert with a praying-mat and a gullah for ever."

" I wonder if you would really be contented to live in Egypt, to make it your home," Stella said. Nicolas appeared not to be listening, but Nancy felt his searching eyes awaiting her answer.

" If I could live in the desert for half the year I should be more than content, and the other half in Cairo as *you* live, not as the English live. . . . At present I can't imagine wanting to live anywhere for *always*. I'd love to see the very latest civilisations, but I should like to live for four years in Egypt first if I could live with your people."

She slipped her hand into Mrs. Lekejian's. " Will you adopt me when Stella's gone ? Let me be your little black sheep ? "

Mrs. Lekejian patted the girl's hand affectionately. " What a temptress she is. What are we to do when you are gone, Nancy ? You keep us all alive : you seem to be a part of our life already."

" You darling for saying that, when you know I'm a perfect plague . . . Nicolas will get some work done again, and Mr. Lekejian will grow quite old for want of teasing. But I suppose you will have to leave Cairo soon." She spoke regretfully.

Mrs. Lekejian looked towards Stella : " So much depends upon her future plans : if Vernon is sent home I suppose she will want to go too "—in speaking of home Mrs. Lekejian always referred to England. " We had thought of going this summer to some watering-place near Alexandria, and Stella had some idea of visiting Syria with Nicolas, of staying on the slopes of Mount Lebanon for the hot summer months ; but Vernon may be sent home on sick-leave if his recovery is not satisfactory, then I don't suppose she'd want to go to Syria."

Nancy said, " I suppose not," though, to her mind, living on the slopes of Mount Lebanon, with Nicolas for a daily companion, sounded so much more interesting than going back to England with Vernon, that her words dropped out in slow wonder. Something kept her from asking why Vernon did not marry Stella whenever he was better and go with her to Syria if he could get sick-leave.

Girgis was inwardly delighted that his picnic was proving such a success and surprise to his guests, who did ample justice to the good things he had ordered. The whole affair was such a striking contrast to the uncomfortable tea provided by his aunt two days before, that Stella and Nancy were amazed that he should have known how to do all these things so well and yet remain contented with his aunt's attempts at Western habits.

In the great stretch of desert, which seemed to Nancy's untutored eye to constitute the whole world as she looked out upon it from the shade of the cool hut, lay the tomb of the Pharaoh whose imperishable work laid the foundations of the wealth of the oasis city of this day. It rose up brown and stern in its primitive grandeur against the blue Egyptian sky.

Nancy nodded to Stella, who like herself was looking at two Arabs who were praying on two circular praying mats of plaited straw: she was envying them their complete surrender to god.

Nancy asked Girgis why he employed Mohammedans when he was such a jealous Copt.

"I make no difference," he said. "I employ Copt or Moslem according to what I think the man is worth . . . that is how it should be; but I do not give all my best-paid posts to Moslems."

"I think that is perfectly fair," the girl said eagerly; "but I imagined you would only employ Copts, as Mr. Lekejian does."

"My party does not consider a man's religion. If a man is better for the religion he believes in, what does it matter what religion it is? We do not let religion govern our politics, we are striving for the betterment of Egypt . . . that is the great thing. . . . But I am not very pleased when I see *your* Government giving all the pensionable posts, all the posts which uphold the dignity of the people, to the Moslems; I wish to see the Christians given the same chance as Moslems—that is all I ask. This can never be done until the 'Independent Egyptian Party' is in power. Which is representative of the Coptic community and many of the representative and wealthy Moslems. Its aim is Representative Government in Egypt, irrespective of race and religion . . . but I go farther than my party . . . they are too slow."

Girgis said the last words with an unlovely smile curling his scarlet lips and showing his gleaming teeth. Mrs. Lekejian, who knew her nephew's fanatical views upon political subjects, tried to divert the conversation—the picnic was not to be spoilt by political discussions.

She was glad when the two Arabs, who had finished their prayers, entered the hut carrying the brass *tisht* and *ibreek* for washing the guests' hands after meals.

The head servant stopped at the side of Nancy and held the basin in front of her—a clean towel was laid across its wide brim. When she put out her hands a second servant trickled some cold water, scented with attar-of-roses, over her fingers from the brass *ibreek*, whose slender spout was as gracefully curved as the neck of a flamingo. The water ran through an exquisitely pierced raised receptacle which acted as a soap-dish, at the same time hiding from view the used water. In this way the next guest did not see the water his neighbour had washed in.

"If this isn't the very essence of refinement and Oriental indulgence!" Nancy said. "I do wish we could live in the desert for a bit—couldn't we?"

"It's almost too hot now," Mrs. Lekejian said. "I was afraid to let you ride under that burning sun to-day."

"I loved it," Nancy said. "I didn't feel the least hot—did you, Stella?—not half as hot as you do in a London omnibus."

In spite of her protest the two girls almost shrank back from the blast of hot air which fanned their faces as they emerged from the hut—it was like the air of a furnace; and the sun was so blinding that Nancy had to drop her veil instantly. Yet Girgis did not seem to be aware of the difference, his thickly lashed eyes never flinched, and he wore nothing to protect the back of his head.

Mrs. Lekejian decided to wait in the rest-house until the party picked her up on their return journey from the Labyrinth and the tomb of Amen-em-hat, so Girgis had the bliss of Stella's undivided attention. He helped her to climb the pyramid, while Nicolas assisted Nancy. It was very unlike the gigantic efforts in climbing which have to be made at the pyramids of Gizeh, for here the whole thing was built of small bricks made of sun-baked mud, which crumbled to pieces under their leather-soled boots, after successfully defying the elements for three or four thousand years. Girgis had been finding it harder and harder to content himself with smiles and tender looks from his cousin; he had broken out once or twice into rhapsodies of love, but as they were generally quotations from Persian or Arabic poems, they were not personal enough to deserve censoring.

At last words escaped him which he had meant not to say, words he had been thinking all day long, for he realised that Stella was gayest and happiest now, when

Vernon Thorpe was forgotten, when her mind was occupied with other things.

They were seated on the ground. Stella was letting the hot desert sand trickle through her fingers! Girgis suddenly grasped her wrist with his firm hand, his masterful eyes drew hers to his. "Tell me, because I adore and worship you, because you have brought into my heart a higher love than I ever understood before, a love which could not offend your pure mind if you could read it all —why do you not desire to marry your English lover any more . . . is it because you have learnt to love your own people too much? Have you ceased to respect the English?"

Stella drew her hand from his fierce grasp. "Girgis, why *do* you persist in saying these things? Of course I wish to marry Vernon, I love him more than ever."

"That is what you wish was true, but is not true."

Stella felt her heart beating more rapidly. "You have no right to say such things. What do you know about my feelings?"

"I know," he said, "because I can read your mind . . . but not all your mind, for I do not *yet* understand why your passion for him has died . . . if you loved me that would explain . . . but you do not . . . not yet . . ."

"I never shall, Girgis . . . not in the way you wish me to, not in the way a woman should love the man she marries."

"How is that way, if you please?"

"With her whole heart; she should feel that for her there is only one man whom she could marry, and that man is the man she loves."

There was silence for a little time and then he said, "Forgive me, but that is not how you love, Mr. Thorpe, and yet you are willing to marry him . . . you are marrying him now because you are grateful to him for having saved your father's life—because he is a hero?"

Stella smiled rather sadly, but did not answer.

Girgis waited a moment or two.

"Would you marry me if I were a hero?"—he paused as though thinking—"if I did something for Egypt . . . very great . . . would you marry me?"

"I am going to marry Vernon."

"Perhaps not?"

"But I tell you I am, Girgis, so there is no use in your talking so childishly." She rose to her feet impatiently.

Girgis saw that she was annoyed: "You are my guest to-day," he said, "and I did not mean to anger you; I have tried very hard not to speak of my love, but 'out of

the fullness of the heart the mouth speaketh.' Will you forgive me? I only live for the sweetness of your smiles."

"Dear Girgis, I do care for you very, very much, or I would not forgive you; but you must not say these things again if you wish to always keep my affection—and you don't want to kill it, do you?"

She held out her hand, he grasped it passionately in his.

"Kill it!" he said, "I will make it grow and grow until it becomes the love you speak of; there is nothing I would not do for you. . . . I would die the worst death, and it would be sweet, for your sake; to do you the smallest service I would become a slave. But as I cannot do these things, please give me your sympathy—I have found no occasion to earn your gratitude and love."

Stella laughed affectionately. "Live for me, Girgis—that will be of much more use and far nobler than dying; you can live and help me to work for Egypt. Do everything that lies in your power to teach the people self-respect; teach the men the wisdom of granting liberty to their wives and daughters, the wisdom of educating them so that there may be many companionable girls in Egypt, like Nancy and myself, for men like you to associate with and marry. . . ." She paused. . . . "Do you know why you love me, Girgis? Shall I tell you? It is because I am the first girl you have ever known intimately who is a companionable human being; you think I am very wonderful because you never dreamt that there were such girls as Nancy and myself: but we aren't a bit wonderful, there are hundreds and thousands like us all over the world."

"God has only made one Hadassah Lekejian," he said gravely, "as He has only made it possible for me to love one woman."

"You will love one who will be far more suited to bring you happiness than I am. You don't know what you need; you're only in the making yet, although you are so very wise over many things. You will remember what I am saying now some day, and know that I am right."

"I shall always remember to-day," he said, "for never before have I been so much alone with you; and I shall remember it because I have sworn to you that I will accomplish some work for Egypt . . . I have determined to be as deserving of your gratitude as Vernon Thorpe."

Stella looked at him with gratitude already kindling her eyes. "I shall be very proud of you."

"I hope so." He said the words so significantly that his cousin questioned him anxiously.

"It will be work done in my own way and according to

my own ideas . . ." he was helping her to mount her donkey, which the Arab had brought to them, as a sign that it was time that they began their homeward journey. . . . Girgis held the reins in his hands a moment before giving them to her. "You will always remember that, whatever sacrifice I may make, whatever work I may do, it has been done for Egypt, and that I have done it for Egypt and *your* sake."

Stella could not look at his burning eyes or take the reins from his trembling hands without realising the terribleness of the Oriental passion which her own desirability as a woman had roused in her hard-headed modern cousin.

Yet with her pulses unmoved she looked into his burning eyes, and as she took the reins into her own hands she said, "I will remember, and I will love you for the work you are going to do, as I love you for the work you have done."

CHAPTER XXIII

To the Lekejian household the visit to Al Fayyum was already a thing of the past; they were busy with preparations for going to England. Vernon had been given three months sick-leave owing to his slow recovery. Since their return to Cairo none of the family had seen anything of Girgis Boutros. In his parting there had been a little more intensity of feeling than Stella thought necessary considering that it was likely to be for so short a time; she wondered if he meant to absent himself from their society until his feeling for herself had become more platonic.

Nicolas appeared to be very much engrossed in a light opera (on Oriental lines) he was writing in collaboration with a Frenchman who had been his greatest chum in Paris. Since their ride across the desert to the tomb of the Great Irrigator, Amen-em-hat, he had never let one word escape his lips which Nancy could have interpreted as meaning more than the most ordinary platonic friendship might allow, while in every way in her power Nancy had tried to find out the true state of his feelings for herself. Sometimes she was convinced he was putting great restraint upon himself and that the words he had uttered at Al Fayyum were spoken out of the fullness of his heart; that in the desert, the elemental man gains the upper hand of the conventional man of the world—in Nicolas's case a man who was obviously determined never to cause himself suffering again at the hand of a woman. At other times she was equally convinced that she had

put too much meaning into his Oriental gift of flattery, that he cared no more for her than all men care for an attractive girl who takes the trouble o make herself amusing. Sometimes she was so angry with his impersonal manner that she felt worn out with her endeavours to upset his self-control, and with her own well-concealed vexation. With regard to her feelings for Nicolas—she was only conscious of the fact that his good or bad opinion of her mattered far too much for her peace of mind, and she was in a constant state of irritation and unhappiness if his last word or attitude towards her was cynical or indifferent.

On their last day of sight-seeing they were going to take part in the popular holiday called "Shem-en-Neseem" or "The Smelling of the Zephyr," which the Cairenes celebrate on the Nile and in the semi-tropical gardens of the Delta Barrage below Cairo. On that day the populace of Cairo, of all nationalities and creeds, join together in common fellowship to "smell the air." It is observed on the first day of the Khamáseen, when hot southerly winds are of frequent occurrence.

On the morning of the festival of the Shem-en-Neseem, the women of the households rise very early, and before doing anything else they take an onion and break it open and smell it. In the course of the day thousands of the citizens of Cairo ride or walk into the country, or, what is still more popular if they can afford it, go by steamer or barge, or indeed by any sort of river craft, to the garden of the barrage. The sight on the river is exquisite, for every boat is decorated with palms, and flowers, and gay Egyptian bunting. Every sort of musical instrument is heard, from the classic reed-pipe of the Egyptian to the tink-tinking of the Italian mandoline; and extraordinary tunes are played in a manner beyond recognition on European brass instruments by natives on board chartered excursionist steamers.

Nicolas was with them, and had entered wholeheartedly into the girls' desire to see all that there was to be seen of the picturesque side of native life on this curious holiday which, unlike most festivals in a Mohammedan country, the Koran had not originated its proceedings. Here and there in some retired spot in the public gardens a pious Moslem was chanting a passage from the "Excellent Book" to some elderly friends, and once Stella and Nicolas were able to stand by and listen to a song being sung in the old Arab style. It was in praise of a favourite camel: the effect was wonderfully restful.

The old Arab songs usually extolled the praise of a favourite horse or camel, the glory of war and fighting, the

beauty of some maiden of purely legendary renown ; modern Egyptian songs are, alas ! usually about love, and, as Stella and Nicolas knew only too well, often horribly indecent in character, at least to European ears.

On their journey up the river to the gardens Nicolas had had an experience of this kind. The boat was crowded, and they had been fortunate enough to secure seats in the bows, when they were surrounded by a crowd of holiday-makers, girls, women, and children as well as men, of every grade, of the commerical lower classes in Cairo.

The Egyptian boy at the piston pipe, a really beautiful creature, dressed in the simplest of hot-weather working garments, was shouting down a tube from the top deck his orders for steering to another of the ship's hands on the lower deck. Nancy saw Stella look very uncomfortable and try to move away. Presently she saw most of the women and men smiling with good-natured amusement : something was happening which she did not understand, and all the while the boy's orders had been getting louder and louder. As his language grew more and more excited, the people laughed more openly ; then suddenly Nicolas, who had been paying for their tickets and getting change from the steward, appeared on the scene, and Nancy thought she had never seen a face so altered with rage . . . she scarcely knew him. For the first time she saw the demoniac expression of hate which only an Oriental can show in his eyes and in the subtilty of his expression. Up till now she had only seen him as the gentle, refined dreamer whose perfect manners never failed him. The reason for his rage she was totally at a loss to discover, even when he put his arm roughly through his sister's and drew her unresistingly through the crowd of holiday-makers to the farthest part of the boat from where the gesticulating boy stood at the speaking-tube. Nancy he left standing in blank amazement close to the boy's elbow. For a moment she felt a little injured that she, was left there quite alone—as a rule Nicolas guarded her as though she would break in pieces if she were roughly touched, as she often laughingly told him ; but the next moment he was back at her side with the *ras* of the ship, who addressed himself to the unsuspecting youth by kicking him as though he were a dog, at the same time expressing to Nicolas the folly of his objecting to the boy's very ordinary language.

As Nicolas drew Nancy away to where his sister was seated, she asked him to tell her what was the matter, but he could not speak, his face was still white with anger. When Nancy reached Stella's side she said : " Do tell me

what has happened? Was that boy rude to you? I didn't see him do anything? He's such a lovely creature, surely he wasn't rude? Did you ever see such a perfect mouth or such teeth? What has happened?"

"Unfortunately I understood the words that came out of his mouth. . . . So I do not think it so lovely."

"Were they awful?"

Stella shuddered. "I want to forget them. . . . Talk of something else. . . . Poor Nicolas!"

Nancy was silent for a moment, and then she said meditatively. "And all these Greek and Italian girls and these tiny children understood! How little one realises when one doesn't know the language!"

"Every one of them understood: they're accustomed to it. The tiny children sing revolting songs. . . ." Stella sighed: "That's why father never will allow me to go about alone when I first came out, and I didn't understand. . . . He hated telling me . . . it isn't only the men, it's every one; though probably that boy never imagined we understood a word of what he was saying. He thought we were ordinary tourists, and that's the way he's accustomed to giving orders to any poor creature whom he thinks is one degree below him in his official capacity."

When Nicolas returned to them he was his ordinary gentle self again; but for the rest of the day Nancy understood why he was so careful not to allow Stella or herself to listen to native singers, or watch the amusing antics of buffoons, until he had himself heard the nature of their performances. The effect of the little incident,—was curiously far-reaching. It had unsealed a door for her in Nicolas's nature. She understood that the awful passion she had seen was as much a part of him as the gentle and refined personality she was accustomed to, yet it served rather to increase her respect for him than to disgust her. When any similar thing occurred, Nancy noticed that Nicolas always hedged himself in with a stronger wall of reserve than usual, and became a few degrees more misanthropic in his attitude towards herself, or peculiarly cynical. He seemed to think that this most objectionable feature of the Oriental character reflected upon himself. On such occasions he hated the East with a deadly hatred. What right had he, whose mind knew the minds of these men, to think of this girl as ever entering into his innermost life? And yet there were occasions when he loved the East as only an Oriental born with a philosophical turn of mind can love it and understand it.

CHAPTER XXIV

In a native café of dishonourable repute in a lonely suburb of Cairo, three young men, members of the advanced Nationalist party, were waiting for the arrival of their fourth companion ; they had met together to discuss their final plans for the assassination of the Khedive, Lord Minton, and the Prime Minister.

Their fourth man was Girgis Boutros !

During their residence in Europe as students, these mistaken young Egyptian patriots had become non-believers, in everything except their own ideas as to the proper governing of their country. They felt themselves perfectly capable of filling any one of the posts held by the great personages whom they were conspiring to murder.

Girgis Boutros had only recently joined them. In his ardent desire to see the establishment of Representative Government in Egypt, he had thrown himself unreservedly into the projects of the most active of the advanced Nationalist party. Personal matters had greatly helped to make him take this step, a step which naturally pleased the Nationalists, who were delighted to have a man of Girgis's wealth and social standing aiding their cause and schemes.

His natural prejudice against the British had for months past been fanned into a flaming fire by what he chose to term personal social slights. Certainly since he had known Vernon Thorpe there had been many occasions upon which he had been submitted to petty indignities from the British, for he had been brought into closer touch with the sporting community in Cairo than ever before, and over and over again his feelings had been deeply wounded.

The very man who was going to marry his adored Hadassah, his own first cousin, the girl who always treated him with the affection of a sister, did not consider him fit to enter his club.

It is impossible to enumerate the petty slights he received or imagined he had received from his future cousin by marriage, and from Vernon's friends, who never thought of him for one moment as anything but a "native," with whom, of course, they could not associate on terms of equality.

On the fatal day he had thrown in his lot with the assassins he was in a state of mind which rendered him not wholly responsible for his actions. His passion for Stella had been steadily gaining hold of his senses. He had been fighting

against it as best he knew how, but alas ! it was not a very successful fight, for the Oriental youth is not taught to restrain himself in his desires, and all that was best in Girgis, as well as all that belonged to the vigour of his full Oriental manhood, desired and hungered for the sweetness of Stella.

He loathed Vernon because he knew Stella considered him superior to himself. He loathed him because chance had given him the opportunity of figuring as a hero in her eyes. He loathed him because he was fair while he himself was dark. He loathed him because he knew that Vernon cared as little for what he, Girgis Boutros, thought of him as if he were a worm.

Since he had learnt that the date of Stella's marriage was practically fixed, he felt that he had nothing left to live for. His plans for the betterment of Egypt, he imagined, ould best be furthered by offering up his life on the altar of Nationalism. By dying a martyr's death he, too, would be a hero in his beloved's eyes, for in the future she would realise the blessings his party had conferred upon her country. She had promised to love him if he worked for Egypt—this was the work Fate had selected for him to do.

With the calm philosophy of an Oriental he faced death fearlessly ; for him "the Land which loveth silence" held no dread, and he knew that certain death awaited him if he either succeeded or failed in his attempt to commit the deed that had fallen to his lot.

The thing he had not sufficient courage or self-control to do was to go on living and making the best of what is good in life when it has been robbed of what is sweetest.

On the first occasion when the four conspirators met together, at the tomb of their hero Wardani, who had not long since assassinated the late Prime Minister, they did not know that they had been shadowed by native detectives disguised as peasants.

Although the eavesdroppers could not hear all that was said on that occasion, they were quite certain that this meeting was of vast importance, for solemn oaths were taken, and the two leaders were well known to them by sight as dangerous members of the Nationalist party. They never lost sight of these four young men for one moment. A few days later, when one of them went to Alexandria quite suddenly to watch the goings out and comings in of the Premier and his entourage, he was, though he did not suspect it, followed the whole time by a detective in the guise of a donkey-boy seeking a customer.

Their second meeting had been held in a small room in a café in Cairo. Again the detectives—this time dressed as well-off young Arabs who had gone to the café to indulge in illegal gambling and other vices which appeal to the Oriental mind—had followed them, but owing to the thickness of the walls, for the building was in the heart of mediæval Cairo, they had not been able to hear much of what was being said.

On this third and last evening, when the conspirators were to decide upon the choice of explosives to be used by the assassins for the murder of the Khedive and the Prime Minister, they had contrived to sit next to their prey during the long tram drive which conveyed them from the city to the desert café. When they got out of the tram they waited until they had seen their victims seat themselves in an arbour made of jasmine and oleander trees. The detectives, who were again dressed as simple fellahin, took up their position just outside the screen, in a dark corner which went well with their humble appearance. Here they could hear and also see, if they put their eyes close to the screen of green foliage, everything that was being said and done, without themselves being seen—for they had no lights except what was afforded by the moon and stars in the clear heavens.

The beauty of the balmy night was lost upon them, as it was lost upon the impatient conspirators, who, as the time went on and Girgis did not appear, grew alarmed and anxious. The detectives noted their growing concern.

In the clear heavens the stars seemed to oscillate until at moments they hung like mosque-lamps over the heads of the listeners, who had ordered cups of black coffee for which they paid one farthing each. When the soft wind moved the jasmine flowers, their sweet, strong scent, so dear to native nostrils, drifted through the air. From the desert came the idle notes of a flute-player who was sitting cross-legged on the sand sending across the desert, at his sweet fancy, bird-like notes from his long reed "*nay*," and, as though to intensify the stillness of the African night the sharp barking of wolf-dogs, which Bedouin farmers set loose at night to guard their flocks from raiding jackals, came from the far horizon.

Inside the café, on a raised divan near the door, a bearded Turk, well fed, red-fezzed, and yellow-slippered, lay smoking his "hubble-bubble." The long red tube of his pipe reached from the floor to his sensual lips, which sleepily held the amber mouthpiece. The occasional "hubble-bubble" which the water made in the enamelled glass bowl on the floor showed that his sleep was not sound

enough to prevent him enjoying the indulgence in his favourite pastime.

On the outer floor of the building a pipe-cleaner sat plying his pitifully paid trade.

The interior of the building, which stretched a considerable way back into the desert, was full of all-night gamblers and hashish-smokers, customers who had business to transact or pleasures to indulge in which did not meet the approval of the city police.

. . . . . .

In Cairo the *cola* or midnight call to prayer was being chanted from the royal mosques as Girgis Boutros, on his fleet-footed mule, rode through the city. On his unheeding ears fell the beautiful and familiar words which open the midnight prayer as well as the call at sunrise.

"Prayer is better than sleep, there is no God but God; alone He hath no companion; to Him belongeth the dominion, and to Him belongeth praise. He giveth life and causeth death; and He is living and shall never die. In His hand is blessing; and He is almighty. There is no Deity but God, and we will not worship any beside Him."

As this call is not an obligatory prayer, it was only here and there that some devout figure prostrated itself to the ground as the chant from the throats of the mueddins floated out to the sleeping city.

In reposeful cafés fat Mussulmans were sleeping on the matted floors, rolled up in white shawls like children; the less satisfied were sitting cross-legged, smoking their *shibouks*. In the background the gay colouring of the painted pipe-racks and mirrors caught the fitful gleam of dying lamps. In the silence of the deserted streets Girgis could have enjoyed the majestic beauty of the mosques with their soaring minarets: the exquisite effects of light and shade; but, as his mule bore him swiftly past Byzantine arches and Koran schools, he had no eyes for beauty and no ears for prayer: he was oblivious of all things save the immediate necessity of joining his companions in the desert café as quickly as possible.

In the morning he had seen Nicolas Lekejian, who had told him very briefly and casually that Vernon Thorpe was going back to England in Lord Minton's private suite, and that Stella and her mother were preparing to leave for England. Nicolas wondered why Girgis had suddenly left him instead of going with him, as he had promised, to see his aunt and cousin.

Since the moment Nicolas told him that Vernon Thorpe was to be in Lord Minton's party on his journey from Cairo to Alexandria, he had thought of nothing else. He was

overwhelmed with the knowledge that it was he, Girgis Boutros, who must kill the man his cousin Hadassah was going to marry; that is to say, if he carried out the vow he had made at the tomb of Wardani, to wreck the train which conveyed Lord Minton and his suite to Alexandria.

Though the café lay some miles outside the city, and he was late even for an Oriental's idea of punctuality, he seemed to be drawing near to the spot all too quickly. His mind was still in a state of chaos, his determination how to act all unformed; yet he dared not curb the pace of his beast, and instinctively he had taken the shortest route to the appointed meeting-place. Only a quarter of an hour was left, and not one idea had formed itself in his mind of what he was to say to his compatriots. He seemed to be riding in a horrible nightmare.

As in a mirage he saw the tomb of Wardani, where he and his companions had taken the oath that they would assassinate the enemies of their party; the vision moved before him with extraordinary vividness as his beast carefully picked its way over stony ground and through heavy sand. He wished that it was he himself who was lying in that tomb, that it was he who had done that great deed for his country, so that he would be saved doing one or other of two deeds which his soul abhorred. He must either revoke his bow or kill the man whom his cousin was going to marry!

. . . . . .

On his appearance at the café the most perfect regard for the etiquette of friends meeting on an important occasion was indulged in. Girgis was then offered some refreshment and invited to be seated at the table, which held various Oriental pipes and cups of coffee. But Girgis remained standing, while he refused all forms of hospitality.

The eldest of the party, noticing his strange aloofness and the very evident nervous strain under which he was labouring, asked him if anything of importance had happened to cause him one whole hour's delay?

"Yes," Girgis said, "something which is of grave importance to *me* has happened."

The tone of his voice more than his words made his companions look at him anxiously, and caused the eavesdroppers behind the jasmine screen to strain their ears. After Girgis's significant remark they had to strain their eyes as well as their ears, for the conversation between the conspirators was conducted in truly Oriental fashion. Much was expressed that was not said, and much was said

that had to be gathered from involved and obscure language. The Eastern saying that the "walls have ears" is accountable perhaps for the fact that Orientals have from time immemorial learnt to speak and give orders without using words. But in this case the walls had eyes as well as ears, eyes that had not only an Oriental's knowledge of a language without words, but had the double sight acquired by highly trained detectives.

"Will you kindly explain the nature of your information?" The words were spoken with an acidity which showed that Girgis's words had fallen upon subtle ears, ears quick to note the finest inflection of voice and expression of speech.

"The information I received this morning which detained me to-night, has nothing to do with the subject we have met here to discuss, except as regards *myself*. It is a purely personal matter; but it affects me so gravely that I have come here to-night, not to help you to carry out your plans, but to deliver myself up into your hands."

The words "traitor," "cursed Christian," and hisses passed from lip to lip. The three men closed round him.

Girgis felt their instant distrust, and knew the reason: he was a Christian, they were Mussulmans, even if they had renounced their faith politically.

"I wish to say that I cannot carry out the deed I have vowed to perform."

Obscene curses instantly flew from the lips of his companions, foul insults were hurled at the Christian dog they had always known him to be. "Death to the revoker!" they hissed as they gripped his wrists and held them in their grasp like those of an arrested pickpocket.

But it was only for one moment. With the fighting power of an ancient Pharaoh, Girgis flung them off as easily as though their restraining grasp had been from the hands of delicate girls. "I will allow no man to treat me as a coward," he said; "I am alone and unarmed, and at your mercy."

In the most insulting words the leader of the party demanded a full explanation for his so suddenly revoking his vows.

"I must refuse to give my reason," Girgis said.

"Then let me recall the fact to your memory that 'death' is the penalty to be paid by any one of the party who revokes his vow—you agreed to that very necessary clause in our agreement at Wardani's tomb?"

"I have not forgotten it," Girgis said solemnly; "I *deserve* death at your hands, and I am prepared to meet my God."

He had no desire to break the vows he had made. Death meant so little to him, since the sweetness of life had been denied him, that he accepted the fact of it with quiet approval.

"You will also recollect that on that same night, at that same sacred spot, you solemnly swore, by the blood of our beloved hero, who gave his life for our cause, that if by any chance whatsoever you were compelled to renounce the part you vowed to undertake in the affair, you would give a truthful explanation of your reason for withdrawing. The sacredness of such a vow may mean nothing to the son of a black camel, but if you persist in refusing to tell us your reason, we will drag it from you as the secrets of your forefathers were dragged from their lips when they renounced their faith for fear of bodily torture, and were received into the bosom of Allah."

Remembering that such a vow had been taken, Girgis determined to tell them the truth; but first he cursed them from the bitterness of his heart.

Out of the fullness of his native tongue, out of the multiplicity of its curses and oaths, he rent them in pieces, for he realised that it was because he was a Christian they had instantly denounced him as a traitor and treated him as a thief. He had seen most plainly that, in spite of the persuasions the Moslems had offered to the malcontent Copts, they would, as soon as self-government was established in Egypt, drive them out of the land and rid it of every native Christian. He recognised the hatred of the man who is born a Moslem for the man who is not of his faith. These feelings flooded his brain like an inrolling wave dashing its full force against a harbour wall. His curses had scarcely left his lips before he said: "If there had been any need to treat me as a prisoner and a traitor I would not have come here to-night; but as I swore at the tomb of Wardani to tell you the reason if I revoked my vow, I will do so now. My cousin," he spoke very slowly, "is going to marry an Englishman. . . . I have just heard that he is to be in the train, which I swore to wreck on its journey to Alexandria. I cannot kill him."

Filthy epithets expressed the scorn of the three Nationalists for his sentimental reason, but the listening detectives felt relieved that their estimate of the young Copt's character had not been at fault.

"And you wish for and seem proud of the fact that this man, who belongs to the cursed race who rule our country, and tax our people, and boast of their inability to understand us, speaking of Orientals as though we were animals and not superior human beings to themselves—this race

who, while boasting that they cannot understand us, yet wish to rule us—this race of bribe-receivers and seducers, who despise all Orientals and, above all, all Christian Orientals—this is the race you are pleased and proud to annex yourself to by marriage—for one of this race you are willing to turn renegade to your party and sacrifice your principles."

"I do not wish my cousin to marry this Englishman," Girgis said hotly, "but I cannot kill him . . . I have come here to-night to ask you to kill me and find a substitute for my part in your conspiracy."

"That is a request you will make many times in the course of the next few weeks," the leader said. "Death will seem very desirable!" The leader's further expressions were too disgusting to be put into English. What had taken place during this eventful half-hour had either been expressed in a form of language which is wholly untranslatable or by signs.

At a sign from the leader a move was made by the party. Instantly the detectives were on the alert: it was their plan to close in upon the men as they left the arbour, which they must do by the narrow opening in the oleander hedge.

Though Girgis protested that it was unnecessary, he quietly submitted to being bound before going with his companions to the place they chose for his concealment. It would be some hole where his unclean tongue could find no chance of betraying their secrets.

Even had he desired to leave them, which he did not, he knew that the attempt to do so would be useless, for they all carried firearms, and experience had told him that there are many nameless graves in the desert which secret hands have dug.

As the three men were emerging from the arbour with Girgis in their midst, their exit was blocked by six fellahin!

With the arrogance shown by Egyptians belonging to the better-off classes to the poor who treat them with the slightest sign of disrespect, the Nationalists tried to thrust them out of their way. To their intense surprise the six fellahin covered them with revolvers.

"You are charged with conspiring to murder the Khedive, the Prime Minister, and Lord Minton. We therefore arrest you in the name of the Khedive."

In the scuffle that ensued two of them allowed themselves to be handcuffed tamely, but the leader of the party managed to draw his revolver and shoot Girgis Boutros, for it flashed into his mind that the Christian dog had betrayed them, that his coming to deliver himself up into their hands had only been part of his well-laid plot to trap them.

As Girgis sank to the ground, the man who had shot him and was now struggling to free himself from the grasp of the detectives, spat upon his upturned face and kicked his tarbush off his head. It was his last effort : while he was insulting the wounded man he felt his hands caught and his wrists forced into handcuffs. His companions could not assist him : they were already manacled.

The whole affair of their arrest had been so neatly and quickly effected that it was over in less than ten minutes.

The pipe-cleaner was still cleaning his master's pipes for the next day's customers, the flute-player was still piping his liquid tune, when the prisoners were escorted from the café by the detectives and their accomplices who had been lying in wait not far away.

Before the first pale light of dawn had fallen upon the brooding features of the Sphinx, or the stars had vanished from the heavens, the three conspirators were safely lodged in gaol and Girgis Boutros was in the Kasr-el-Hainy, the city hospital of Cairo.

CHAPTER XXV

STELLA was seated in her father's garden awaiting the arrival of her lover. He was coming to lunch, and to spend his idly midday hours with her, probably the last before his departure for England. In the dark pergola, where only glints of the fierce African sun could penetrate the thickness of the luxuriant foliage, it was easy to forget the heat and squalor of the native city, with its plague of flies, and the sun-blazoned side-paths of the Esbekiya square, where natives who have nothing to sell, and wish to beg from the wealthy travellers, lie on the flagstones as though they were there to provide the homeless with beds.

Presently Vernon appeared at the end of the long pergola. At his coming Stella rose eagerly from her seat in the central kiosk, where iced drinks and cool fruits were temptingly displayed on Persian dishes of ancient blue enamel.

But her steps slackened as she saw the expression on her lover's face ! He carried an open newspaper crushed in his hand. As he reached her he threw it at her feet, saying, " Read what your beautiful cousin has done, or rather what he tried to do ! "

Too taken aback to feel hurt at his abrupt and unmannerly greeting, Stella took up the paper with shaking hands ; it was a copy of the Coptic daily paper, the " Al Watan," which, for the benefit of its foreign subscribers, has the

English version of its contents printed side by side with the Arabic.

Where Vernon's hand had crushed its print Stella saw in large letters the words, "Attempted assassination of the Khedive, the British Agent, and the Premier. Conspirators captured."

A little further down she read the names of the four men who had been arrested: Girgis Boutros was amongst the number. No details of the capture were given beyond the fact that the editor expressed deep regret that Girgis Boutros, an influential and highly respected young Copt, had intended to wreck the train which was to convey Lord Minton to Alexandria on his departure from Cairo for England. Nothing was said of his renunciation of his vows, or of the serious condition in which he now lay in the city hospital.

With a cry Stella covered her face with her hands as though to blind herself to her misery of shame, and, turning her back on her lover, she flew to her seat at the end of the long pergola. Where, in an attitude of hopeless despair, she flung herself down on her knees and buried her head in her arms.

Vernon followed her slowly, his heart not softened one bit by the girl's pitiful weeping—the girl whom, according to his fashion, he loved—for he was conscious of one thing only at that moment—his nature knew no complicated emotions—his intense hatred of her cousin Girgis Boutros, and of all things Egyptian. The idea that he was to be connected with such filthy scum of the earth as he now considered Girgis was revolting to his senses; everything that was English in him rose up fiercely against it. As he came closer to Stella he felt for the first time that, beautiful as she looked even in her misery, she belonged to a people that could never be his, that in her desolation she herself was actually one of them. He could not stoop to comfort her. Why was she not filled with rage and anger as he was, rather than with distress? If she felt one particle of sorrow for this wretched cousin of hers, then she well deserved all the humiliation his deed would undoubtedly bring upon her family. She had brought the disgrace upon herself by having allowed the intimacy of cousinship to exist between them. He had offered to cut her off for ever from these horrible relations when he had first discovered what they were like, and she had emphatically refused to consent to his wishes.

When her weeping, which, in its intensity, was due to the overstrained state of her nerves, had abated, Vernon said coldly, "Now perhaps you will at last consent to leave

these connections of yours and live in England . . . will you ? "

His last two words were spoken with a little more softness. The beauty of the bowed head and the grace of the girl's supple figure were appealing to his senses. He expected her to raise tear-stained eyes to his, with gratitude gleaming through them like sunshine in rain ; but instead, to his utter amazement, she sprang to her feet with all the swiftness of her Eastern inheritance, and faced him with blazing eyes.

" How dare you ? " she cried. " Oh ! how dare you ? How can you, at this moment of all others, when I must cling to my people, when I must keep the promise I made to Girgis ! He has done this thing because I asked him to . . . Oh, you poor boy ! . . . You poor, wrong-headed Girgis, what have you done ? Was it because you wanted to be a hero in my eyes ? Is this your work for Egypt ? "

" Good Christ ! " Vernon said slowly, " so you are in it ? " His face had become ashen white . . . " My God ! so this is what you have come to ! . . . Is this how you have loved me ? "

" It had nothing to do with my love for you : I would have given my life for you as you offered up yours to save my father." Her eyes flung a new defiance at him.

" For the sake of the love I believed in once," he cried, " don't lie to me, if you and your cursed race are capable of speaking the truth ! "

The full significance of *his* interpretation of her words had not yet dawned on Stella, but, maddened into Oriental passion at his insulting speech, she struggled for breath to speak. Her English upbringing and her father's strength of will, which she had inherited, helped her to address her lover with perfect control over her choice of words, although her voice was breathless with emotion. " As you are incapable of believing that we can speak the truth, there is no use in my trying to explain to you why my cousin has apparently consented to do this deed. You must think what you choose . . . nothing I can say would alter your opinion. . . . You naturally imagine that it is from the very lowest motive : he is simply a murderer in your eyes."

" His reason is quite plain : you have already explained it. You were to reward him by giving him your love. I was to be in that train, and he knew it ! From an Englishman's point of view he is nothing more or less than a murderer, though he may choose to term himself a political assassin."

The girl's shriek of horrified rage rent the air; she fell at his feet! The shame of his thought of her overwhelmed her. "Oh, God, let me die . . ." she moaned, "if you have thought this thing, if you have believed that I could love the man who would willingly have killed the saviour of my father!"

"What else is there to believe?" he said. "Don't play-act, Stella. Girgis has been arrested for conspiring to murder the British Agent on his journey to Alexandria—you and all your family knew that I was going to be in his party, and you yourself have confessed that you promised to love your cousin when the deed was done."

Something very like hatred gleamed in Stella's eyes for the man to whom she had given her first love, as she said very cruelly: "Only because of the gratitude I shall always feel for you, and nothing more, will I allow myself to deny your horrible accusation. . . . I never knew anything about this hideous crime my cousin was going to commit, and I do not believe for one instant that he was aware of the fact that you were going to be in that train . . . how could he have known? . . . I have not seen him. . . . When I told you that he had done this thing for my sake, I meant that it was because he had promised to work for Egypt to please me." She sighed. "I remember now he said it would be work done in his own way; and this is what he meant."

"Leaving personal matters alone," he said coldly, "I am afraid you cannot alter the principal facts of the case, that he was one of the conspirators who have been arrested for plotting to 'kill the enemies of their country,' as they would describe their brutal murders."

Stella was sitting in a huddled heap on the gravel path, but she did not raise her head. "If you would only try to understand!" she said. "It is because he does most sincerely believe that these men in the service of the English Government are the enemies of his country that he has given his young life for the cause: these patriots, as they unwisely consider themselves to be, have not feared death—you must admit that? I asked him to do work for Egypt, to prove his love for me. I said I would love him if he did—not in any way in which, as your faithful wife, I might not have loved him. And this is what he has done, this thing which you, the man I once unquestioningly loved and promised to obey, cannot understand. You pride yourself on not understanding us, you rejoice in the fact that you never could; I fail to see that it is anything to boast of."

"You are quite right," he said; "I don't and never will

understand. Thank God, treachery is not a characteristic of the English race. We may be stupid . . . I know you think us so, but we are even by your race considered trustworthy. I told you the very first week I arrived in this hateful place that it was best for you to get out of it, to cut yourself free from its influence and from the relations who were nothing to you at that time. I wanted you to remain the Englishwoman I thought you were in every respect except name."

Stella rose to her feet very slowly: there was something very Eastern in her movements, as she looked at him with unlovely scorn in her eyes and said: "You see I am not, and never was an Englishwoman?"

"Well, Irish, if you like," he said impatiently. "What does it matter?"

"Or an Irishwoman," she said, still more bitterly. "I am a Syrian; I belong to a race which taught the Egyptians a higher civilisation thousands of years before you and your island barbarians were discovered to the world. I am Hadassah Lekejian, Nicolas Lekejian the Syrian's daughter, and I should be far more ashamed of denying the fact or of leaving my people because the man I loved scorned them than of having caused poor Girgis to do this mad deed, a deed he attempted to do from a sense of duty to his country!" Her voice softened. "Are you totally incapable, Vernon, of seeing any other person's point of view but your own—are you so characteristically English?"

"With women seeing things from other points of view generally means 'condoning the deed.' I'm afraid I can't." Vernon's eyes were as cold as his manner was unloverlike, but he was more than a little surprised when Stella, upon hearing his answer, said quite firmly:

"Then let this be good-bye; I will never see you again. I have forgotten father too long, I must go to him . . . he must by this time have heard more than the papers tell us." As she spoke she quietly took the ring from her finger, which he had placed there with so much love and tenderness, and held it out to him: "Please take it back," she said, "I need not wear it now."

He looked at the emblem of their engagement vacantly for one moment—their parting had come as an overwhelming shock to his senses—as it lay in the palm of his hand. Its almost childish size struck him even at the moment as pathetic: this tall girl in front of him, whom he had once sworn to cherish, was cast in such delicate lines that his strong manhood suddenly hungered to possess her. The next moment he had sent the ring flying through the air.

As it fell it hit the wing of a little Cupid who had been in the act of stringing his bow on the top of an old stone pedestal for many centuries. When he turned and faced her all his belief in the treachery she must have inherited from her people showed itself plainly in his eyes. His hands were dug deep in his pockets: he would not trust himself to hold hers. "Let things be as you wish," he said brutally; "you are right: this had better be good-bye if there is to be nothing more between us . . . You wish it?"

"Yes, I wish it," she said, "for even if I loved you as I once did, I would not allow you to sacrifice yourself by marrying me. I know now all that you think about my people, and as I owe you an unpayable debt for having saved my father, I would not be so ungrateful. . . ." She straightened herself, as though to gain fresh courage. "I must go to him, and not waste time: this will almost kill him." Her voice shook as she spoke. "I can't say any more, I have no more to say"—she held out her hand. "I only beg of you, go home to England and forget all about me and my people; but when you do think of me, don't be harder than you can help: try to remember that you do not understand or wish to understand the characteristics of the people whose blood is in my veins."

Vernon did not take her outstretched hand. "It is horrible to part like this," he said. "Have you quite forgotten the old days in England, when nothing of all this sort of thing ever entered our heads, when you love me so truly, or so I imagined, that you would have done anything I asked of you? . . . You would never have let any one come before me then."

"I was a girl then, and girls are very selfish in their love; now I am a woman, and no self-respecting woman should let herself be governed in all things by the man she loves, if she disapproves of the demands he makes upon her—that sort of love is mere slavery, it is mere animal passion. . . . I couldn't do the things you ask, Vernon, and still love you."

"Yet I asked so little." Vernon spoke in the past tense, for, unconsciously, he was just a little relieved that it was Stella herself who had broken off their engagement. At the same time he could not bear to let her go out of his life with this feeling of bitterness in her heart. Her beauty was as desirable as ever in his eyes—it was maddening to think that he was losing it. It was galling to his pride that she could surrender him so easily—surrender him for the horrible natives to whom she considered that she belonged.

"You asked me to forsake my people for yours, to sink my identity in yours; for you take no interest in my interests, and never tried to—I have always had to throw myself into yours. You wanted me to make the social world to which you belong forget that you had married a wife out of Egypt . . . to forget it where any stigma might be attached to the fact. In places, perhaps, where they do not know the manner in which the English treat us and look down upon us in the East, it might have added a touch of picturesque interest to your household if you had said 'My wife is a Syrian' . . . but the fact would have to be talked of with discrimination. . . ." She paused. . . . "I'm afraid my woman's understanding of the respect a wife should have for her husband has not stood the test of your demands in these things."

"If you don't love me it is best to say good-bye; it takes a cleverer chap than I am to follow all that you wish your words to imply." He spoke impatiently.

They walked in silence along the garden path where sun-birds of brilliant plumage were darting from shrub to shrub, dipping their long beaks into luscious tree-flowers of Eastern splendour, and roses of every hue.

At the parting of their ways Stella put her hand on Vernon's arm: there was pleading in her touch. "Everything you have said and done that has hurt me and my people, Vernon, will be forgotten—everything will be forgiven . . even your" . . . she hesitated, "even your belief in my treachery towards yourself. We will always think of you as the man who saved my father's life. . . ." Tears filled her eyes. "Sometimes, when I have thought of what you did and of all that it means to me, I could let you treat me as your slave. I could willingly obey your most unlovely commands."

The next moment she had gone, and Vernon was left wondering!

CHAPTER XXVI

On her way to her father's private office, Stella met Nancy, who, the moment she saw her, ran to her and caught her by the arm excitedly. "Oh, Stella, what is the matter? You look awful! And Nicolas wouldn't even speak to me just now when I passed him. He was looking for you. Has anything *very* terrible happened?"

Stella pressed the girl's hand convulsively in hers. "Yes, something awful has happened: but let me go to father.

. . . I can't speak, dear, don't ask me. . . . Where is Nicolas? Which way did he go?"

"That way," Nancy said, pointing to the passage which led to Mr. Lekejian's office. She did not try to restrain Stella, but stood lost in wonder and filled with a miserable anxiety. The way in which Nicolas had drawn himself away from her, as though he was suffering from some infectious disease which might harm her, had made her think for the moment that some plague had broken out in the city, and that he had been in close contact with the infected. But the awful look of misery, mixed with anger, which his eyes expressed when she implored him to tell her what had happened, contradicted that impression; there was something far more personal and tragic in it.

Stella fled on, regardless of Nancy's discomfiture. So Nancy sat herself down to think on the gnarled root of the ancient lebbek tree, whose top branches reached right up to the exquisite meshrebiya work which had served as a window-screen for the women's drawing-room in days gone by.

As Stella neared her father's door she met her brother coming to it from the opposite direction. Both stopped instantly and looked despairingly at each other.

"Where is Vernon?" Nicolas said. "I thought you were with him, Stella! Does he know?"

"He has gone, we have parted for ever! How is father bearing it? Does mother know?"

Nicolas put his arm round his sister; she drew herself away.

"Please don't, dear. I want all my courage for father. . . . Vernon doesn't matter—I mean our parting doesn't. . . . If he could think such things of Girgis, how could I marry him?"

Nicolas looked at her in amazement. Was she in ignorance of the depth of their cousin's villainy? "But Stella, don't you know, don't you understand, haven't you realised what Girgis was trying to do?" he shuddered.

"Yes, of course I do. It was a hideous and cruel thing but according to the poor boy's lights these men they were plotting to kill were all the enemies of his country; that is a very different thing from trying to murder his cousin's lover from jealousy? Vernon imagined that Girgis knew that he was to be in the British Agent's party!"

There was silence for a moment, then Nicolas said very slowly in Arabic: "He did know, Stella. . . . God have mercy on his soul!"

Stella suppressed the cry that sprang to her lips; she caught her brother by his shoulders and made him face

her. "That is a lie, Nicolas. Oh, say it is a lie! Some one has dared to tell you that lie! Have you seen Girgis? Did he tell you himself? I won't believe this hideous thing until he himself confesses it: he couldn't do it, I know he couldn't."

Nicolas took her two hands from his shoulder and held them firmly in his own. "Be brave, Stella, and face the horrible truth. Girgis did know—I told him myself! I met him early yesterday morning. I told him that we were leaving for England, and that Vernon was going home in Lord Minton's suite."

Stella did not speak. With bowed head she held her brother's hands passionately in hers . . . when words came she said: "And I loathed Vernon for thinking such a thing possible"—she spoke as though she was visualising the scene which had just passed between her lover and herself—"and it was true, it was what he thought."

She looked at her brother with a face so stricken and withered with shame that half a woman's lifetime, a lifetime of suffering, seemed to have passed over it in the last few minutes.

"Girgis must have been mad," Nicolas said. "He would never have brought this shame upon us in his normal state of mind. . . . He has ruined your happiness . . . and he has . . ."

She stopped him by exclaiming: "We must go to father . . . will you find mother and let me go to him? Mother went out—I think to Cook's."

"I'll find mother," Nicolas said; "she may not know. Poor mother!"

When Stella opened the door of her father's office her eyes met a sight which she would never fail to remember in after years—whatsoever happiness her future might bring forth.

In the ancient Coptic language Nicolas Lekejian was praying aloud on his knees, beside his business desk; his head was buried so despairingly in his arms that only his red fez could be seen. Stella went silently up to him, and, slipping down on her knees by his side, put her arms across his shoulder and joined in his prayers. Her touch made him turn his head and look at her.

"Hadassah!" he cried, "Hadassah!" In a moment his arms were open and his child was in them.

"Hold me closer, father darling, hold me far closer; never let me go; let me stay with you always!"

The tears that fell from his eyes tasted salt to her lips.

"Don't cry, father; don't let this make you ill again.

Girgis loves you ; he must have been mad ; you must forgive him."

" God in His mercy forgive him," Nicolas Lekejian said, " for the shame he has brought on my household." As he spoke he rose from his knees, and, seating himself in his business chair, he held out his arm for his daughter to seat herself on his knee. Never since she was a little child had his beautiful Hadassah seemed so near to him. The tender affection he had given her as an infant he bestowed upon her now, the old pet-names came instinctively to his lips ; out of the well of anguish that he felt for her, the waters of healing were poured forth abundantly ; broken sentences of sympathy, fearful words of inquiry dropped from his lips. " When was she to see Vernon ? Would she like her father to see him first and spare her all that he could ? His little Hadassah, his pearl among daughters, the precious jewel of his bosom ! "

With her two hands Stella raised his face to hers, and looking into his eyes she said : " Father, I will tell you something that will lessen your sorrow for me a little."

" What is that, my daughter ? "

" I have seen Vernon this morning. I have broken off our engagement." In an agony of sympathy for his child the old man crushed the girl's hands in his . . . but she went on unheedingly . . . " I would have married him before this happened if he had wished me to . . . because he saved your life. . . ." She bent her lips impulsively to his and kissed him. . . . " Oh, dearest, if we had lost you ! . . ." She shut her eyes, and trembled at the misery the idea conveyed. . . . " What should we have done ? . . . I would have married him, but I did not love him—it would have been from gratitude. It would have been for want of courage to tell the man who saved you for us that I did not love him."

" Hadassah ! " Her father's voice evinced absolute consternation. " You did not love Vernon ? "

" No, father, not any more ; I once did . . ." she sighed, " but that sort of love seems to belong to years and years ago. I'm different now."

" Does your mother know ? " he asked. " She is out this morning—has she returned ? Have you told her this ? "

" She doesn't know that my feelings for Vernon have changed. . . . I didn't want any one to know. . . . But now that this has happened ! " she shuddered.

" Are Vernon's feelings the same for you ? " Nicolas Lekejian groaned. . . . " How did he take this horrible news ? "

Stella felt by the manner in which her father spoke that he did not know that her cousin had heard of Vernon's plans for travelling in the British Agent's suite. A great wave of hope and longing came to her that he might never know. If only by some miracle it could be kept from him, one drop of misery would be spared her, and the bitterest shame removed from the memory of his nephew's name in her father's eyes. She answered him evasively. "Men's affections are so difficult to understand, father, all except yours." She caressed his cheeks with her soft palms. "I suppose he cared for me just as much as ever until he heard of this, and until I resented the things he said about my people—then I spoke hatefully to him. Sometimes I used to wonder if he wouldn't have been glad to be free; I think he would if he had felt quite certain that I shouldn't have married any one else."

At that moment three telegrams were brought in by Mr. Lekejian's confidential clerk. There was a note on the top of the telegrams, which were on an ancient Arab tray. "This requires an immediate answer, sir," the man said in Arabic. "The hospital porter is waiting." He pointed to the note, and with a respectful salaam withdrew to the outer office.

The note was from the doctor of the city hospital, a very able man, whom Mr. Lekejian knew intimately.

It ran:

"If you wish to see your nephew Girgis Boutros alive, please come at once—the worst is feared."

"Yours with sympathy,

"K. B."

Nicolas Lekejian rose, pushing Stella gently from him. "Find your mother, child, and stay with her." He kissed her tenderly as he pressed an electric bell at his feet. The turbaned servant was at his master's side again in answer to the summons.

"Tell the man who brought this that I will follow him; give Mr. Nicolas these telegrams when he comes in and ask him from me to answer them, and lock up my desk." The next moment he had left his office and was out in the courtyard.

Nancy, who was still seated below the lebbek tree when he passed it, rose to her feet and flew to him. "Won't you tell me what has happened, Mr. Lekejian? Every one seems steeped in gloom? Can I help you?"

"Little girl," he said, "something very dreadful has happened, something you must try to forgive, for Girgis Boutros is dying."

"R.G. dying! Oh, Mr. Lekejian, it can't be true!" But the girl's words fell upon the silent courtyard, for Mr. Lekejian had passed into the outer court, where the porter at his coming sprang from his old stone bench near the door and, at his master's silent order, which was given by the merest sign, darted up the street to find a cab. In less than four minutes he had returned with one and was respectfully helping him into it, while with the exquisite courtesy of his language he uttered the familiar blessings on the out-going of the master of the household.

. . . . . .

When Nicolas Lekejian entered the hospital he was at once taken up to the ward in which his nephew was lying. As the nurse who accompanied him opened its door, the doctor hurried down the length of the room to meet him: he felt a sincere sympathy for the man who had given so much of his time and brains for the service of British rule in Egypt, who had got so little from the British in return, and who was now, by this dastardly attempt of his nephew, placed in a position of humiliation; but he was quite unprepared for the change the shock had produced in the man. The Syrian, the only one of his race whom the doctor had ever really respected or greatly admired, was now an old man! In the East there is a very short time granted between the years of middle age and infirmity. With Nicolas Lekejian there had been none. These few hours, since the papers had published the brief notice of his nephew's attempted crime, had eaten them up. The doctor shook him by the hand silently and sympathetically as he walked with him to the patient's bedside, a sign from the nurse beckoning them to come more quickly.

They hurried their steps, but the angel of death went before them; and ere they reached the narrow bed, where since daybreak the life-blood had been flowing from the lungs of the young patriot, it had stopped and gathered in its arms the soul of Girgis Boutros and borne it to that valley of expiation, wheresoever it may be, which must be traversed before the erring are granted peace.

When Nicolas Lekejian stood by his nephew's dead body he said: "And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities into a land not inhabited."

CHAPTER XXVII

When Nicolas Lekejian returned from the hospital to his home, Stella and her brother found it *un*necessary to deceive him about Girgis's knowledge that Vernon was to be in the train which he had planned to wreck, for the doctor had given him full details of the capture of the conspirators by the police, and of Girgis's death at the hand of his own confederates. The news lifted the burden of shame from their hearts, and in their thoughts of him lessened the awful horror of his meditated crime. Stella underwent a revolution of feeling, and hated herself for ever having believed the accusation against him. Her old belief in his loyalty to herself and his gratitude to Vernon for having saved her father was re-established.

His sudden death came as an overwhelming shock to the entire household. It seemed more *un*real to Nancy than to any of the others. She could not realise that any one so alive with the virility of manhood should have suddenly become non-existent; it was incredible.

Nicolas had found her in his mother's morning-room, but Mrs. Lekejian had not yet returned.

The girl's stricken face had torn Nicolas's heart and made him yearn for her all the more deeply; the cheeks of his pink hedge-rose were as pale as snowdrops. When he saw that his mother was not in her room he turned to go—he could not trust himself alone with the pitiful figure; but as he was about to leave without speaking to her, Nancy cried to him: "Nicolas, what have I done? Girgis is dying, your father says. What has happened? Why can't I know?'

"Dying!" Nicolas started. The suddenness of the news astounded him, but he felt no pity for the miserable youth.

"It is the only thing he could do," he said bitterly. He imagined, of course, that his cousin had committed suicide. "He has disgraced himself and brought shame on our household." He put the girl determinedly from him as she rose to her feet and impulsively held out her hands to detain him. "Don't touch me," he said: "this house is no fit home for you . . . you don't understand . . . Girgis was conspiring to murder your brother!"

Nancy staggered back: his words stunned her, she could scarcely gasp out the question, "Vernon? Is he safe? Where is he?" as she stared at him with terror in her

eyes. Nicolas could have killed himself for having so cruelly hurt her, for the girl's words had come labouringly.

"Vernon is perfectly safe—he was here this morning: the conspirators were caught before the deed was attempted. . . . My cousin . . ." Nicolas emphasised the relationship with a bitter purpose, "was arrested last night along with the three other dastardly villains who were plotting to kill the Khedive, the Prime Minister, and Lord Minton. Girgis was to have wrecked the train which conveyed Lord Minton to Alexandria."

Nancy's hands went up before her eyes—the horror of the idea was too near—but Nicolas's abrupt movement to leave her made her drop them and cry out sharply: "You mustn't go; stay with me"—she caught him angrily by the arm—"stay with me, I tell you! I can't bear to be alone: it is cruel of you to go."

Nicolas stayed by her side and forced himself to speak calmly. "I will do anything I can for you, little Nancy," he said, "anything in the wide world that will help you. I was a brute to tell you so abruptly, but I was mad—mad with anger; and I thought the sight of any one of us would naturally be loathsome to you . . . I was afraid to come near you."

Nancy smiled through her tears. "When you all shunned me I felt lost, and a stranger amongst you for the first time. And I thought you cared a little for me. . . ." She shivered. "Oh, this land is terrible!"

"You are lost to us, Nancy," he said; "Girgis has cut all our ties . . . you must forget this horrible country and go home."

"What do you mean? Girgis must have gone mad; he was not accountable for his deeds. Love sends some natures mad, when it is hopeless. Vernon will understand . . . now that the poor boy is dying. Oh, poor, poor R.G.! . . ." she paused . . . "Affection makes life damnable!" Nancy looked at Nicolas for an answer.

"His form of madness is damnable," he said bitterly: "it has broken the engagement between your brother and Stella: Vernon could not marry into our family after that."

"Oh, Nicolas! Who said so? . . . he could . . . he could if he loved her even as poor Girgis loved her . . . but Vernon does not know how to love . . ."

Nancy's trembling ceased; she was suddenly transformed into the combative, daring girl whose love for her schoolfriend never wavered, and to whom the evidence of her brother's self-satisfied character was constantly asserting itself unpleasantly. "What proof is there," she said, "that Girgis wished to murder my brother? . . . I can

understand and believe that he would do anything, however awful, for political reasons, for I have always considered him quite unbalanced on that subject; but I refuse to believe—and I think you ought to as well, Nicolas—that he would stoop to murder any one for purely personal motives, or that he would knowingly have killed the man who saved his uncle's life. Girgis adores your father. Do you know," she said encouragingly, "he once told me that he considered that the giving of Stella to my brother (whom of course, as an English soldier, he disliked) in a way helped to repay the debt his family owed Vernon for having saved your father? I believe that Girgis would have saved Vernon's life instead of taken it, if it had only been to earn Stella's gratitude! That is not the sort of stuff criminals are made of—criminals who stoop to murder for personal motives?"

Nicolas's eyes were aflame with gratitude for the girl's words, but he made no response.

"You must prove to me that R.G. knew that Vernon was to be in that train before I allow myself to think the worst of him."

Nicolas was on the point of telling her the horrible truth about his cousin, for he wished to spare his family nothing in her eyes, when his father hurriedly entered the room. Nancy flew to him and flung her arms round him; the weight of years and sorrow that had suddenly been added to his life almost made her cry out.

"Where is your mother, Nicolas?" he said as he looked eagerly round the room. He had accepted the girl's proof of affection gladly and was tenderly caressing her hands while he spoke. When he saw that his beloved wife was not there he said in a tired, hollow voice: "I have just returned from the hospital. Things are best as they are! Girgis is dead!"

The two listeners did not speak.

"I was too late to hear any confession he might have wished to make. A bullet from a revolver, fired at him, by one of his own party, entered his lungs . . . he bled to death."

"Why did they shoot him?" It was Nancy who spoke, very quietly and fearfully.

"Because they thought Girgis had betrayed them. They were all arrested only a few moments after he had arrived at a little café in the suburbs, where he had gone to tell his companions that he could not carry out the horrible crime he had bowed to commit. . . ." Mr. Lekejian pressed the girl's hand closely in his own and looked into her eyes as he said the last words. "He had heard in

the morning that your brother was to be in Lord Minton's party. . . . He met his compatriots in that café last night to deliver himself up into their hands. He knew he would be tortured to death!"

There was silence for a moment, then the old man repeated the familiar Coptic prayer which begins with the words, "Oh, my Lord, have mercy! Oh, my Lord, have mercy!"

A groan of relief and gratitude came from Nicolas's lips as his eyes sought Nancy's.

"Thank God he died!" she said. "Poor wrong-headed Rameses the Great!"

"God is merciful!" Mr. Lekejian said. "His mercy is farther-reaching than we understand. He will judge the boy justly."

"But he is so young to die," Nancy said. . . . "I'm so glad, so awfully glad that he met his end like that . . . that he refused to commit the crime. It was just as if God had sent him reason at the very last. . . . Does my brother know?"

"No, my child, I think not." Mr. Lekejian hesitated, and looked at Nicolas.

"Nancy knows—I have told her, father."

"Yes, I know," she said hurriedly, "but, oh, when Vernon understands that Girgis practically lost his life because he would not be a party to murdering him, that he refused to carry out the awful vows he had undertaken in a fit of madness, they will be the same as they were before . . . Vernon will . . . will . . ."

Mr. Lekejian turned to leave her. He could not tell her that his child had ceased to love her brother. "If it had been you who were going to be my dear daughter instead of Vernon my son, things might have been the same, but alas! that is not the case."

The next moment he had closed the door behind him, and Nancy and Nicolas were left looking foolishly at each other.

A crimson blush dyed Nancy's soft face from her throat to her forehead!

Instantaneously with Mr. Lekejian's words there rang through her ears her own words to Stella that night at Al Fayyum! "If I fall in love with Nicolas I shall have to propose to him . . ." The idea possessed her. Why should she not, by one moment of daring, in this awful hour of anguish, when his suffering robbed *her* of all false pride, offer herself to him as his wife? She knew that he loved her and that he would never, unless she tempted him beyond measure, tell her of that love. She was willing

to risk the humiliation of rejection in the hope that her offer would be received with joy.

"Nicolas!" He turned to her; the beautiful blush had not left her face, and the tone of her voice told him more of her tale than she was aware. She held out her hand: he knew that she was offering it to him as his wife, but he did not move. He had only to stretch out his arms and she was his; instead of which he stood with bowed head and firmly clenched fingers.

Nancy went to him and placed her hand very shyly on his. "Won't you take me, Nicolas? Don't you want me?" The next moment her hand was imprisoned in his passionate grasp.

"Oh, my darling! God knows how much I want you, but we're not fit for you, Nancy . . ." his words came brokenly . . . "this is only pity you feel, it can't be anything else."

"I have always tempted you, Nicolas, because I have always loved you . . . you can't refuse me, dearest, after my having summoned up courage to ask you. . . ." She looked at him with lovely, taunting eyes.

"Little Nancy," he said wearily, as though bodily exhaustion had overcome him . . . "don't tempt me to behave like a villain—help me to resist!"

The man's abject humility brought tears to her eyes, but there was still a playful lightness in her voice when she said: "I once told Stella that if I fell in love with you I should have to propose if I wanted to marry you; now I must tell her that I *have* proposed and have been refused, that you are shocked at my want of maidenly modesty."

"Nancy," he said hoarsely, "you know I love you! You have known it all the time! You knew you were asking me to accept the one thing that could make life sweet—you knew it, or you would not have done it! I will always worship and adore you, more than ever now for having done this thing—though God knows you have tempted me almost more than I can bear."

"Then don't bear it," she held out her hand, "give in and make me your wife."

"I can't allow you to ruin your life."

"Why ruin it, Nicolas, when I'd rather belong to you than any one else in the world?"

He looked at her with exquisite tenderness shining in his eyes—"Little English Nancy, you are only a child in years; you will go home to England and marry a man of your own people . . . you don't understand all that I should be doing if I accepted what you offer, you can't understand . . . you don't know what you would have

to give up, what you would be subjected to." He shook her almost roughly out of his way as his mind recalled all the slights his mother and sister had endured. "Let me go, for pity's sake, Nancy. Don't tempt me any longer."

"First tell me, Nicolas, why it would have been all right for Stella to marry Vernon?"

"Because he would have taken her home to England, she would have borne his name, her race would have been swallowed up in his . . ." he spoke bitterly . . . "You can't blame him."

"I see," Nancy said slowly; "Stella would have been changed into an Englishwoman by marrying my brother, while I, an Englishwoman, should have been changed into a Syrian by marrying Nicolas Lojekian junior, and I should have lived in Cairo?"

"Exactly, for while my father lives I will never leave him; I am not much of a business man, but just of late he has learnt to rely upon me in the matter of correspondence . . ." he looked at her hungrily, for love was making its demands . . . "I mustn't let you do it."

The girl was thoughtful for a moment. "Your mother has been happy, Nicolas?"

"You mean she has never allowed us to see her suffering: she has given up her life to her husband and her children."

Nancy answered him with the pleading that was in her smile.

"My darling," he said, "if I loved you less than I do, if I did not treasure you as something far too pure and unspotted to sully with the life out here, I would forget your happiness and think only of my own." He put his arms round her. "I want to hold you just once, Nancy, as if you belonged to me, may I?"

Nancy yielded her pliant body to his embrace, their cheeks were pressed together. Nicolas dared not trust himself to seek her lips: the sweetness of her breath was on his neck, the fragrance of her being was enflaming his senses. In that sublime draught of love all sorrow and suffering was forgotten, the ecstasy of the moment obliterated the memory of renunciations.

Then Nicolas, while the best in him still triumphed, unclasped her fingers from his neck and held her from him at arm's length. "God bless you," he said; "your sweetness and dearness are not for me, but after this I can fight, I can be strong."

He crushed her hands tightly in his.

"Good-bye," Nancy said softly, but as her words were spoken she thrust her pleading face quickly forward and pressed her lips against her lover's.

When she raised her head, she whispered: "My husband! For in my thoughts and in my heart you will be my husband, Nicolas, and I am your wife." So remember if you marry again you will be committing bigamy."

"Good-bye, little wife," he said, "and God guard you."

The next moment Nancy had left the room, and Nicolas was alone, enjoying over again the brief ecstasy of their first embrace.

CHAPTER XXVIII

NANCY fled to Stella's room. She found her standing by the window, looking out into the palm-garden; she did not appear to notice Nancy's entrance until the girl's arm was slipped through hers, then she turned questioning eyes on her to see if the girl knew of Girgis's death.

Nancy understood the meaning of her look. "Yes, I know, darling!" There was silence again, for mere words at such a moment seemed a pitiful mockery of the inexpressible sorrow she felt for her friend. Tears filled Stella's eyes—Nancy's sympathy had brought them, and they were a welcome sight to Nancy, for the girl's motionless calm was harder to bear. Vernon's name Nancy could not mention: he seemed to her at the moment despicable and inhuman; her passionate young being longed to transform itself into a man and a lover, so that she might fold Stella in strong arms, and show her how she would love if she were a man. To know that this girl, whose loveliness never grew stale in Nancy's eyes, had been thrown over by her brother in this hour of trial and suffering, filled her with wrathful indignation.

"Stella," she cried, "I have proposed to Nicolas, and he has refused me." She could not have said it if she had not been certain of Nicolas's love; the knowledge of it was in her heart like a song.

"Nancy!" Stella's voice betrayed reproach rather than sympathy—reproach that her friend should have dared to offer such consolation to her brother in their dire humiliation: it seemed to her a form of patronage which was not in good taste.

"Yes, I told you at the Fayyum that I should be driven into doing it . . . and I was."

"In what way?"

"Because I love him, and he made me understand he would never ask me to be his wife, he told me that this deed of Girgis's had placed a gulf between us for ever . . . he could not have said more plainly, 'I can't marry you.'"

"And how could he?"

"He could do anything if he loved me . . . love can move mountains!"

"He does love you—you know that?"

"Not in my way, or he'd marry me."

"His own way is nobler, Nancy!"

"Oh, fiddlesticks!" she said scornfully. "I don't want nobility, human devotion is good enough for me!"

"You ask for humility?"

"I don't!" Nancy spoke emphatically. "I want the happiness of becoming his wife. . . ." She paused, and then added irritably, "For hypersensitive reasons he won't grant me that happiness, he has refused me: why *should* he spoil my life?"

Stella drew her hand away. "Nancy I wonder if you really know what love is—it's so deceptive . . ." Stella sighed . . . "so deceptive, Nancy, for many false gods will rise up and call themselves Love . . . Nicolas is unlike the men you have been accustomed to meeting, just as we are unlike the women Girgis knew, and you are provoked because you can't make him say that he loves you."

Nancy interrupted her: "He's got brains and ideas: he makes life interesting. When I'm with him I always think there are so many interesting things to do that the days could never be long enough . . . when I'm alone, and his ideas are forgotten, I don't know how to pass my time."

"*Vernon* was a new type to me when I met him . . . I thought him very unusual!"

"I can't describe my feelings for him then, I never stopped to think; I took it for granted that I loved him . . ." she blushed . . . "and I did adore him in a sort of way: his good looks and active manhood roused feelings in me that I mistook for love. It's really awfully difficult to know, Nancy, when you are quite young, and when a very good-looking man makes love to you."

"Stella!" Nancy's voice was filled with amazement. "You had ceased to love him before this happened!"

"Yes, I asked him for my freedom!" Stella's loyalty to the memory of the man whose love she had once so glorified in would not allow her to let even his sister know that she had freed Vernon for his own sake, freed him from a tie which she knew had become undesirable to him on account of her birth.

"And Vernon!" A tone of sisterly loyalty to her brother was evident in Nancy's voice: it betokened a touch of resentment.

"I have not broken his heart, the wounds will mend.

We fell in love with each other's physical attractions, I suppose, and intimacy has proved that in characteristics we are unmateable."

"Did you love any one else, Stella? Was it poor Girgis? I think it is only loving some one else that can show a woman that sort of thing!"

A cry of horror told Nancy how mistaken her idea had been. Stella's hands flew up to her face to hide the crimson blush of shame which her question had called up. Did she love some one else? It was weeks now since she had allowed her senses or mind to dwell on the image of Michael Ireton: she had imagined she had driven him out of the citadel of her heart. She had fought the fight over and over again, until the repeated attacks of his strong personality at unguarded moments had almost ceased.

"I'm so sorry, Stella dear. Do forgive me! It was horrid of me!" cried Nancy.

Stella raised her eyes to Nancy's, "Poor Girgis! . . ." He was so young to die; so full of life; and with all his wealth and perfect health, life should have been so sweet—he seemed to have everything a young man could want."

"Except your love!"

"I never dreamt how much he wanted me really . . . I thought he was only a boy . . . it is so difficult to believe that men can really feel any lasting depth of love for a woman when it begins so suddenly. Girgis would have asked my father for my hand the first night he met me if he had not known I was engaged to Vernon. I have always heard and read that with all Eastern and Oriental races *real* love comes at first sight: it was certainly so with Girgis."

"We're too English to understand that sort of thing."

"I'm *not* English; I ought to understand, I suppose."

"You are English: your mother is, and your bringing-up has been English; you're accustomed to the reserve of English people—Girgis's flowery expressions didn't mean anything to you . . . I'm sure Vernon never said anything more poetic than 'I'm beastly fond of you, old girl, and you know it,' and yet you believed in him implicitly."

Stella smiled, for the remark was certainly reminiscent of Vernon's attempt at expressing his feelings for her.

"Girgis promised to work for Egypt to please me: I meant him to work in the way he always has worked, educating the farmers, giving money for new schools, and by setting the good example he has done to other wealthy Egyptian youths of not gambling, and of leading a clean, healthy, open-air, active life. And now he has done this

mad act! Allowed himself to trust these horrible Socialists, who are the true enemies of his country! And then to shoot him as though he were a dog! Of course they came to the conclusion that he had betrayed them because he was a Christian—that's typical of all Moslems, their distrust of Christians!"

"But he *couldn't* have thought it would *please* you, Stella—he knows your views?"

"He wished to appear a hero in my eyes, as Vernon did: he knew he must die if he accomplished the deed, for the conspirators who have done these things have always met with death, and, be it to their credit, they have never feared death; but he had not the courage to live if he could not have me for his wife."

"Poor foolish Girgis!"

"He asked me if I would love him as a hero if he did some great work for his country."

"And such work!"

"I said I would, and then he said (I recall his very words now) . . . 'Remember, it will be work done in my own way, but it will be work done for Egypt and for your sake.' And now he's dead, and to-night he will be buried, and to-morrow the world will know him no more! And all this is because I am alive! I must go on living and hating myself every hour of the day." Stella flung herself down on the low couch by the window and wept. . . . "Of what earthly use am I? Why take this good life and save a drone—a woman like myself?"

Nancy stood by her, not knowing what to say.

Stella turned and faced her suddenly. "Isn't it horrible to be me, Nancy? If I could have loved Girgis, this thing need never have been—if I'd never been brought up to believe I was like Western women!"

"It would have made no difference, Stella: if you had married him, Girgis would have gone his own way, in spite of his adoration for you. In politics you could never have influenced him, he'd have come to this sooner or later: he was a born revolutionist."

The truth of her remark made Stella's face less tragic.

"You must remember that death meant nothing in his eyes; life was sweet when its desires were procurable, but death did not matter—it was one of the things that happen: a man's fate is about his neck!"

"He was my full cousin," Stella said woefully, "and yet I know that what you say is true, though it seems incredible that any one so closely allied to me could see things in that light. . . ."

"Will he be buried to-night, Stella?"

"Probably, after sun-down: in this weather there is no time between death and burial. That is why we come to look upon death more lightly, the whole thing is over so quickly."

Nancy shuddered. "It's awful, isn't it? There's something so pitiless about Egypt. It gets down so remorselessly to the bed-rock of cruelty and of passions."

"You must leave it, Nancy, and forget its mixture of races, its mixture of creeds, its mixture of hates and morals. You don't understand the hundredth part of its race-hatreds: how all the different sects of Christians loathe and detest one another, how all races loathe and despise the Jews, how the Jews in their turn loathe and detest the Moslems, how the English Christians despise and scorn the Eastern Christians, and how the Copts detest the Greeks."

Stella had not finished her list of hates before a knock came to her door. A servant entered and said, with a profound salaam: "The lady of the house has returned; she desires her daughter's presence in her room."

CHAPTER XXIX

Two months later Miss MacNaughtan was once again waiting in her green and black drawing-room for the arrival of her favourite pupil, Stella Adair. She was seated in the same deep-bedded sofa as she had been when she had waited for her two years ago, she was again listening for the sudden stopping of a taxi at her door. The sound she was expecting caught her ears, then the opening of the front door, and then the tread of feet on the polished staircase and the murmur of voices. It was Stella speaking to the old man-servant. Then the door was opened and her darling flew across the room to her: the next moment the two women were locked in each other's arms.

When the long embrace was over the elder woman drew the girl to the sofa; they sank into it together, still in silence. Stella let her eyes wander slowly round the room: her ardent gaze took in every familiar object and marked jealously each new feature of decoration, each new ornament. Impetuously she rose to her feet and stood for a moment in front of a large photograph of Watts' "Love and Death."

Miss MacNaughtan watched her with sympathetic eyes: she knew her pupil had come into a woman's inheritance of suffering, and that suffering must be borne alone. She saw that the school-girl she had nurtured so carefully existed no longer; she was glad that this creature of noble

womanhood was there in her stead. Like a bird whose feathers have been bruised and bent with the buffeting of many winds, Stella flew back to her seat on the sofa. As she sank into it she buried her face in her hands.

With a deep breath, which was a relieving sigh, the words escaped her lips: "Thank God!" She looked up as she spoke, and dropped her hands in her lap.

"For what, my darling?"

"For you. . . ." Thank God He has left *you* at least unchanged."

"My poor child! With you—things had to change, you were only in the making, you *had* to leave girlhood behind and take your place in the kingdom of womanhood."

"A kingdom of suffering?"

"Not altogether; in womanhood the sweetness is so much sweeter if the pain goes deeper."

Stella suddenly changed her tone. "Naughtie, I remember now all that you meant and *knew* when you came back from Egypt and wouldn't explain. Do you remember how I asked you what you were keeping back?"

"I didn't know nearly *all*, but I was afraid!"

"Wouldn't it have been better to have told me, to have warned me?"

"It was hard to know. I thought not, dear. . . . What good could it have done?"

Stella paused and then said reflectively, "I wonder?" Her wonder was whether, if Vernon had known, he would have gone to Cairo, or would have changed into some other regiment and made her marry him without waiting? She knew that she would have done what he asked then; but even now, as she thought of it, the sigh she had given was one of relief—relief that things were even *as* they were rather than as they *might* have been! Suddenly she said, "You know that Nancy is in love with Nicolas?"

"Is he in love with her?"

"He adores her! We all adore her; she's such a brick! Dear, loyal little Nancy, *she* has never failed us."

"When are they to be married?"

Stella shook her head. "Nicolas won't give in."

"What about?"

"Haven't you heard that the other three conspirators have got five years' penal servitude?"

"Yes, I saw it in the papers a few days ago."

"Girgis, my cousin, might have been one of them." Stella's face quivered convulsively.

"But Girgis is not Nicolas. . . . I think he is hypersensitive. . . . You know, dear, I would not pretend to

approve of Nancy or of you marrying a man like your cousin Girgis ; he was brought up in Oriental customs, he was elemental in his passions, he was essentially Eastern : but your brother is to all intents and purposes a European, a highly-cultured man and a perfect gentleman ; besides, Syrians are not a dark race. It is not as though coloured blood was to be feared . . ." she paused. "Poor little Nancy ! So she, too, is passing through the fire ? "

"Yes, the whole of a woman's life is pay, pay, pay, and the ones who feel the most pay the most heavily." Stella paused, "and yet the work I'm going to do will only add to the suffering of womankind ! "

Miss MacNaughtan looked at her anxiously. "What work is that, dear ? "

"I am going to teach the women of Egypt to be clean and to suffer ! "

"My dear ! " Miss MacNaughtan smiled.

"I am. . . . It's quite true ! "

"But how—in what way ? "

"I've at last gained father's consent. I'm going back to Egypt to lecture in the schools for women. I'm going to lecture on all sorts of *domestic* things. . . ." She turned smiling eyes to her companion. "I'm going to teach the humbler classes the virtue of cleanliness, not only of the body but of the *mind*, I hope, and I'm going to teach them how to work and be good housewives, instead of the idle, filthy creatures they are, living solely by animal instincts. . . . I'm going to show the upper classes the wisdom of educating their girls so as to be companions and not slaves to their husbands. . . ." She paused and sighed. . . . "Oh ! and generally, Naughtie, inoculate them with the sufferings of a higher civilisation. . . ." She paused. . . ."I wonder if it's a case of the fox that had its tail cut off ? It seems woefully like it, doesn't it ? "

"You wouldn't be different from what you are, would you ? You wouldn't change with one of them ? "

"I'm going to do it, Naughtie ; the idea has been growing and growing. . . . My engagement to Vernon stopped it. . . . But now—now that I am free, if seems as though it had all been arranged so that I should do it. Nancy wants to help me ! "

"But her people ? "

"She inherits her mother's money at twenty-three ! She's quite free ; but I don't want her to. . . . Dissuade her if you can, only I'm afraid that if Nicolas doesn't marry her, she'll do something of that sort. . . . Egypt has unsettled her ; she's lost all taste for conventional English life. . . ." She paused. "It was modern Egypt that

fascinated her—she took very little interest in the ancient things. She's like Vernon in that, only he hated *everything* Egyptian."

"But you, dearest—what sort of a life is it for you?" Miss MacNaughtan looked troubled.

"It's the only one I can see before me . . . and I always see it. I have seen it ever since I began to understand things that are below the surface in Egypt. . . . I want to work for the poor who are totally unenlightened, but it's very difficult—they are so afraid of Christians trying to proselytise. There was a dreadful letter in one of the native papers the other day, hurling the most foul abuse, and insinuating, and attributing the lowest motives to a dear woman who was lecturing to a crowd of women, trying to teach them some of the first principles of hygiene, the keeping of their babies clean, the folly of charms for curing sore eyes, and all that sort of thing."

"Reformers must suffer persecution; it's splendid work." While they were discussing the subject, Clarkson brought in the tea and arranged it in front of his mistress.

Stella's eyes took in at a glance the fact that her favourite sandwiches and cakes had not been forgotten. She laughed as she inspected the dishes. "Dear Naughtie, I do believe I'm growing younger. The sight of these stuffed olives makes me feel that life still has its moments!"

"I'm so glad, dear, but I want it to have its years. I've looked forward to this day for ages and ages, it seems to me; letters are so unsatisfying, even though you told me all the essentials."

"And now things are so different, and yet the same. . . . When I look at you, Naughtie, I see light ahead! I feel more confident of myself. I used to long to live a life like yours, and then love came . . .!" she paused . . . "or I thought it did, and it drove out all my fine ideals; but they've come back—they weren't dead, they were only drugged for a time. . . ." She shook herself as though to throw off even the memory of her servitude. "I'm so glad I'm free from the chains of love. I'm glad I own myself again."

"Poor dear!"

"I'm not speaking bitterly. My heart isn't broken . . . not even chipped. . . . It's all the other things in me that were hurt . . . and oh, so bruised! . . . pride, belief, loyalty, justice—everything, in fact, except my heart; *it* was only . . ."

"But you loved him?"

"His good looks and love-making carried me off my feet, that must have been all. I suppose every woman

finds a great charm in being loved ; perhaps she has to be loved many times before she herself knows what real love means."

"Then things, after all, are for the best."

"I suppose so. . . . But was it necessary to undergo all this . . . to find it out ? And now Nancy has to carry about a hungry heart ! "

"A little waiting won't do her any harm : it either strengthens affection or kills it."

"I don't think Nicolas will ever consent." Stella laughed at the memory of something that had suddenly flashed across her thoughts. "Do you know, Nancy actually proposed to him—at least she swears she did. I was too sad, at the time she told me, to laugh, but I've often done so since ! "

"My dear, how like Nancy ! "

"It was on the day Girgis died, when everything was terrible. I had just broken off my engagement with Vernon. She was so sweet, Naughtie, I wonder that Nicolas could have been strong enough to resist her. Father worships her, and she plays with him like a kitten . . . and yet she's such a true woman. After Girgis's funeral, when father was ill, she nursed him—in that awful heat. She sat up watching him, with mother and me, night after night. She was wonderful. Nicolas and she used to meet during all that time just as friends ; she behaved like a brick to him. . . . We were coming home then, you know."

"Yes, I expected you weeks ago."

"Father took ill quite suddenly."

"How is he now ? "

Stella sighed. "He's an old man, though he's not sixty yet—an old, old man. Girgis killed his last spark of youth. It was terrible.

"My poor darling, I'm sure it was."

"In the East most men are old at sixty, and yet once they get past that age many of them live on and on until they are any age. The men who live frugal lives, live to be as old as Methuselah."

"One of the blessings of poverty ! "

"Exactly ! Bread and coffee and smoke is all they can afford. Poor father—although he could have indulged himself in every kind of luxury, he's lived such a temperate life. . . ." She paused. "Father's religion has always meant a great deal to him ; he's lived up to it ; his has been a beautiful life."

"He's been a true friend to England."

"That's where he is so big," Stella said eagerly. "You

can't make him bitter towards the English, in spite of the treatment we have received at their hands. . . . He says these are petty things, that no race is without its faults, and that their shortcomings must be overlooked because of the wonderful work they have done for the country. *He* sees the difference! . . . Poor Girgis was too young! He came into a generation grown used to the benefits conferred on his country by the British, a generation eager to find fault and revolt against the smallest grievances. You don't find many of the old men in Egypt amongst the Socialist party!"

The telephone-bell sounded, and Miss MacNaughtan rose to answer it. In a few moments she called out, "Stella can you come with me to-night to a lecture at the Royal Geographical Society? I have had two tickets offered to me. Penrose, the explorer, is going to lecture on his journey across Central America and down the Amazon."

Stella nodded. "I'd love to, but if I do I must go home at once." She rose from her seat. "Where shall we meet?"

Miss MacNaughtan hung up the receiver. "Come for me here, dear; it's not much out of your way, and we can drive there together."

Stella looked at the clock. "It's half-past five now. I must be back again at what time?"

"Seven-thirty, if we want good seats. It's sure to be crowded."

They walked to the top of the stairs.

Stella looked up with happy eyes as she ran down them. "It's like old times, Naughtie, going to lectures together!"

Her old mistress smiled a loving answer. "Good-bye, dear. Do you want a taxi?"

Clarkson was ready to open the door and blow his whistle. While Stella waited he said: "H'it's been a rare treat to see you h'again, miss. There's never been h'any one like you in this 'ouse, h'ever since you went away."

"Oh, Clarkie, I'm so glad! I'm so awfully glad nothing ever changes here . . ." she sighed.

. . . . . .

As Stella drove swiftly up the long, familiar road she felt happier and more at rest than she had done for many months. Life was readjusting itself: it was not going to be without its interests, its ideals, its beauty!

Her heart gave a bound and the vivid blush of youth dyed her pale skin, for while passing at lightning speed a West End club, whose name she did not know, she saw

the figure of Michael Ireton coming down its front steps. The next second he was lost in the great ocean of London humanity : it was as though she had seen him in a dream.

But that one flash of his living presence instantly brought back to her her life in Cairo. It was now the real thing ; London was the unreal ! For the rest of her ride she noted nothing of the almost supernatural movement of the traffic, with it continuous roar, which only a few moments before had so fascinated her, or of the familiar points in the landscape of streets and squares which had brought back vivid memories of her school-girl life. The taxi stopped at her door, while in her mental condition she was still standing in the corridor of the Arab theatre, with Michael Ireton's big figure towering over her. His last words were in her ears, and her pleading cry of " Oh, don't go, please don't go ! " filling her world of sound.

. . . . . .

CHAPTER XXX

The auditorium of the Royal Geographical Society was almost full when Miss MacNaughtan and Stella entered it. With some little difficulty they found two seats in one of the upper rows of the closely-packed building. They had scarcely settled themselves before the lecturer stepped forward and took his place at a desk on a slightly-raised dais in front of the screen on which the illustrations of his subject were to be projected by magic-lantern slides.

The subject of the lecture was extremely interesting, and the illustrations were delightful, but, the speaker had not the feeblest idea of how to make his subject humanly interesting.

Stella's thoughts strayed from his dull statistics, while her eyes wandered round the gathering of oddly-assorted people. From where she sat it was almost impossible to see the occupants of the lowest row of seats in the auditorium—the bench always reserved for " The Fellows of the Society " and their specially invited guests.

When at last the lecture was over it was the minority who found their way to the reception-rooms at the back of the auditorium, where interesting relics of the Society are shown, and the members meet to discuss the lecture and talk to their friends.

Presently there was a little excitement in the reception room, for the lecturer was entering it. He was followed by the well-known guests and Fellows who had been seated in the places of honour.

Stella was examining the contents of a glass case at the far end of the room, while Miss MacNaughtan was surrounded by a number of friends who were regular attendants at the lectures given by the Society.

Stella had not watched the entry of the distinguished members, she had just lifted her head to satisfy herself as to the cause of the flutter amongst the audience. Suddenly she became aware of a new force in the room, some thing which, human or inhuman, had acted upon her senses like a magnet. Without knowing why, her pulses uncomfortably quickened, her sensibilities became painfully acute; with such highly-organised natures as hers, this psychic experience is not uncommon. To shake off the thraldom of the magnetic force she moved to the next glass case to examine its contents, but she felt incapable of intelligent thought. The approach of something whose near presence seemed in a way connected with her increasing nervousness compelled her to turn her head: she could not have resisted if she had tried. At that moment her whole being was expectant! The room contained nothing but herself and this new devastating force. Yet her mind had not connected any individual human being with that power.

So when Michael Ireton's eyes looked into hers as she turned what he imagined to be eyes of welcome to him, the shock made her for a few moments mentally unconscious and physically powerless.

To Stella hours seemed to pass before she could say the conventional "How do you do?" Indeed she never said it, nor did Michael Ireton think it necessary to speak.

The whole bearing of the man was just the same as it had been on the first night when she had seen him, when his dominating personality had drawn her eyes to him, across the crowd of faces at the opera.

At last, bravely fighting for command of her voice, she said, scarcely above a whisper, "I didn't see you during the lecture: were you there?"

He took her nervously offered hand in an eager grasp, which conveyed to the girl the sense of an enfolding embrace. "Yes, I was there, and I knew you were, though I didn't see you."

She withdrew her hand.

He looked at her questioningly. "Are you . . . ?" He hesitated . . . "Are you alone?"

"No, I am not alone!" Stella knew that he meant to say, "Is your husband here?" for the whole expression of the man told her that he thought she was married. She turned her head towards the talking people who were

striving to get as near to the celebrated explorer as possible. "I am with my old school-mistress, Miss MacNaughtan; she is over there—that lady with the beautiful grey hair and dark eyes"—her voice was gaining strength.

"I see," he said, unthinkingly, for his eyes were looking at Stella's hands. The white suède gloves were inexorable; if she wore a wedding-ring he could not see it. . . . There was a pregnant pause again. The burden of their hearts was too heavy for their lips to speak of small things: to ask each other how they were would have been the bitterest sarcasm when they were horribly conscious that it was just of how they were that they dared not speak.

The girl saw that the man had hardened, and yet had not become embittered; each line on his rugged face had deepened, each mark of fortitude grown surer.

And he saw in the girl, physically fragile as she had become, a new womanhood far dearer and more desirable than that which had gone before. He saw in her, as the wife of another, the only woman for whom his manhood had suffered starvation. These impressions were the immediate action of the senses, too swift for words.

"I have had no news of you since we parted," he said at last. "You must have much to tell me . . . may I hear it . . . ?" he looked at her with gentle eyes . . . "I can bear it, dear."

Stella's lips quivered. "You haven't heard, you don't know . . ." she paused . . . "of my cousin's death . . . and what caused it; you have heard nothing since . . . since that night ?"

"I have been out of Europe; I wanted to cut myself off from all news until . . ." he looked at her searchingly; he saw that she was trembling and deeply moved: evidently there had been some painful tragedy connected with her cousin's death. Stella made an effort to tell him, but he prevented her. "Not just now," he said gently. "Seeing me has suddenly recalled unhappy memories: don't let it distress you; you must tell me everything some other time. . . ." He paused before asking, "May I come and see you . . . or would you prefer that I did not ?"

His eyes assured her that if he came it would be in no manner that need embarrass her or cause her husband the slightest annoyance. He waited a moment for her answer.

Stella raised star-like eyes to his—"you are quite right: seeing you again so unexpectedly has brought back everything . . . poor Girgis ! . . . so much has happened . . . far more than you think !"

"I understand," he said soothingly, "you needn't say

any more . . . I won't ask to come . . . some day perhaps, when things are less vivid you will tell me all." He turned to go, but the same cry came to Stella's lips that had escaped them on that awful night . . . when Vernon saved her father's life.

"Don't go! Oh, don't go . . . it isn't that!" But her cry was unheard, for in a clear, loud voice some one spoke to him, and laid a white-gloved hand on his arm from behind. The speaker was a beautiful American girl, whose quick glance took in with some curiosity of expression Stella's unusual quality of good looks and her fine individuality of dress: in the peculiar transparency of complexion and the delicacy of figure there was something curiously star-like and othereal about Stella when she was in evening dress. As the American drew her eyes from her reluctantly she said: "Oh, Mr. Ireton, at last I've run you to earth! I so much want to introduce you to my great friend Jewel Gibson: you've heard me speak of her many times."

Stella quickly turned away and made a good pretence of examining the contents of the glass case by which she had been standing when Michael Ireton came up to her. An unconscious flame of jealousy leapt through her veins; it served to steady her excited nerves. She had noticed the expression of pleasure that lit up Michael Ireton's heavily moulded features when he discovered who was the owner of the hand which was put on his arm to arrest his attention.

The girl was so eager and radiant in the full bloom of her newly developed womanhood, so wide-browed and clear-eyed, a type of the most enchanting of America's daughters, that compared with her Stella felt herself to be cruelly seared and battered.

If only she could have said three more words, to tell him that she was not married, he would have understood the real meaning of her emotion. He would have known that he might come and see her. But these were the very words she knew that she could never say unless he deliberately asked her the question, and there was no mistaking the meaning of his voice when he said, "I understand; you need not explain."

He thought that one of the many things that had happened was her marriage with Vernon, instead of it being one of the many things which had not happened, as she had meant her words to imply. While she watched him talking to the two girls her jealous eye imagined that Michael Ireton was fond of the beautiful girl, that he had in all probability and very wisely, thrown himself into an intimate friendship with her in his desire to forget and conquer his love for herself.

With a war of conflicting emotions tearing at her nerves, Stella sought Miss MacNaughtan.

"My dear child, you look tired to death. What is the matter?"

"I am *dead* tired," Stella said languidly. "Do you mind if I go home . . . no . . . don't let me take you away, I can perfectly well go alone."

As she said the words she wondered why she was asking to go when she knew that her desire to stay in the same building as Michael Ireton for as long as she could was greater than anything in the world—to stay, even though there was not the faintest likelihood of her being able to speak to him again that night—to stay and watch him speaking to the beautiful American girl, whose blue eyes seemed to smile so trustingly at him, even though watching them tore her heart to pieces.

As Miss MacNaughtan hurried Stella off to the cloak-room she wondered if anything very unusual had occurred, or if Stella's present delicate state of health was accountable for this sudden avalanche of physical tiredness which had made the girl look as though a draught of cold air would blow her out. As they opened the door, they came face to face with Michael Ireton! Then Miss MacNaughtan understood. He had evidently been hurrying so as not to miss them. A flush of clearest crimson dyed Stella's pale face.

"I couldn't let you go without saying good-bye . . . Mrs. Thorpe," he said. "I lost you in the hall. . . . May I see you into your taxi, or have you a motor?"

Stella looked at him gratefully—how comforting it was to feel that he had not let her drift out of his life without even trying to find her!—yet all she managed to say was, "A taxi if we can get one. May I introduce you to my friend, Miss MacNaughtan?"

Michael Ireton said cordially, while a smile of genuine pleasure lit up his eyes: "I have very often heard Mrs. Thorpe speak of you in Egypt. I am very glad to have had the chance of meeting you."

Miss MacNaughtan looked critically at this man as he spoke. Did he mean anything to Stella? Had a chance meeting with him been the cause of her sudden physical tiredness? Stella was obviously affected by his appearance at the cloak-room door, but whether the girl liked him or not she was unable to surmise. Stella had fallen behind, driven by the contrary forces at work in her into separating herself from Michael as far as possible. His words "Mrs. Thorpe" kept ringing in her ears. If one of the impulses that were at work in her could have spoken

it would have cried aloud, "I am Hadassah Lekejian, not Mrs. Thorpe. I am free; don't leave me."

A storm of doubt was troubling Miss MacNaughtan. Was this one of the crucial moments of Stella's life? Would it add to her happiness if she were to tell this man that she was still unmarried? And yet, if Stella had desired him to know it, why had she not told him the fact herself? She had talked to him already that evening. The older woman felt certain that this chance encounter with this very unusual-looking man meant a great deal to her pupil. He had only spoken to her about the most ordinary matters for a few moments, yet he had made her feel that to know any one who cared for Stella was a pleasure to him, that whether she was Stella Thorpe or Stella Lekejian his mind and heart were full of her.

They had to separate for a moment while Michael Ireton hastily got his coat and hat; still they were too near him to allow her to ask Stella any questions. When he rejoined them and Stella had again given up her place at his side to her chaperon, Miss MacNaughtan suddenly said, as an empty taxi drew up for them:

"My old pupil is still Stella Adair, as we used to call her—you have not apparently heard that she did not marry Vernon Thorpe . . . her cousin's tragic death broke off their engagement."

"Not married?" A flash of almost boyish happiness lit up his strong face and opened Miss MacNaughtan's heart to him for ever: it told her all that she wanted to know about the character and personality of this man whom she now knew, loved, with the simplicity and unchangingness of a big man's nature, her old pupil.

"They were not suited to each other," she said in a lower tone; "everything is better as it is."

"Thank you for telling me," he said.

The impatient porter had now opened the taxi door. Stella said mechanically, "Naughtie, are you ready?"

"Yes, I'm coming."

Michael Ireton was shaking hands with her; Stella heard him say, "Thank you for telling me." She could see by his face that he knew she was free. The next moment Miss MacNaughtan was seated in the taxi, and Michael Ireton was waiting for her to shake hands with him and take her place in the cab.

As she put her foot on the step, she held out her hand.

He took it with a clasp which to the girl was deliciously expressive of possession; he meant her to understand that she was his. "*Ma as salamah*" (good-bye), he said ten

derly, "*wa atekum essalam wa-barakat Allah*" (and on you be the peace and the blessing of God).

He used the familiar Arabic words intentionally: He wished to show her plainly that her connection with the East was a pleasant memory to him.

As Stella answered his compelling gaze with eyes which denied him no expression of her love, she said softly: "*Tkattan Allah* (thank you), Michael, *ma as salamah*" (good-bye). . . . The words meant literally, "May God increase your goodness: good-bye."

The next moment Stella's hand was withdrawn, she was seated by Miss MacNaughtan's side, the taxi door was slammed, and they had moved quickly off into the night.

As Michael Ireton stood alone on the kerbstone watching their disappearance, he suddenly remembered that he had let her go without asking her where she lived. Nor had he heard any direction given to the driver, for in his mind's eyes he could see Miss MacNaughtan raise the speaking-tube to her lips and give the driver his instructions while he was saying good-bye to Stella. He made ready to jump into the next taxi that pulled up; but an elderly lady had hailed it and quickly took possession of it.

Stella was completely lost to him in the millions of souls living in London.

Defeated in his attempt to follow her, he walked slowly on, his whole being still on fire with the memory of the ungrudging love Hadassah had offered to him in her eyes. Even though she was lost in London, he knew she was his absolutely. Every sense in him at that moment told him that Stella was even now rejoicing in his love for her; under such circumstances nothing else seemed to matter, nothing was insurmountable. She was free to give herself to him when he found her, and find her he would. He did not know that he had but one day to do it in, for Stella was leaving London for Lucerne the day after.

As he walked on, not taking the trouble to ask himself where he was going, he thought of every possible means of discovering her whereabouts. Often as he had heard Stella allude to her old school-days in London, he had no recollection of ever having heard her mention where her school was situated. He wondered if Miss MacNaughtan was a member of the Royal Geographical Society, or if she was using some friend's tickets for the lecture; he must look up the list of members the next morning.

In going over the events of the evening, he realised that Hadassah had been trying to tell him that she was not married, that she had not meant to tell him not to come,

that seeing him so suddenly had upset her—it had brought back to her all the painful events of their last meeting.

Then doubts attacked him. Even now that she was free, would she have allowed him to come and see her—had she only given him that parting look of love because she knew that he would not find her? With her hypersensitive nature she might think it was her duty, considering her social position in Cairo, to prevent him marrying her.

As he thought of the delicacy of her appearance, a fierce desire to hold her closely to him overwhelmed him. Her exquisite fragility appealed to every chord of strength in his muscular body.

It was a beautiful night, almost Italian in the warmth of the air and the violet tone of the sky. Michael Ireton, wandered on, following unconsciously the demand in his present mood for the sympathy of beautiful surroundings, and he found himself crossing the bridge which spans the artificial lake in St. James's Park. There he stopped. The outline of the Government buildings at the Westminister end of the water, so curiously Oriental in effect against the purple of the night sky, seemed to be the very atmosphere for the crisis in his life, into which he had been unconsciously drawn. Though Hadassah was lost to him in the great city whose very pulse beat he could feel where he stood, as totally lost to him as he had seemed to her only a few hours before, he no longer felt alone in London.

He had no desire now to leave the next morning. His one idea was to remain—remain until he had found her.

. . . . . .

For many years Michael Ireton had lived a life almost devoid of the society of women, for his profession had taken him into distant parts of the world, where primitive natives were the only women he saw. He had led too exciting and too busy an existence to miss their companionship, and during the months which he had spent at home he had, until only a few years ago, stayed with a very aged grand-uncle who had brought him up in a desolate village in Wales. The old man had died the year before Ireton first saw Stella, but he had lived long enough to see his nephew—for whom he had stinted and saved during his public-school life and all through the years he had spent in training for his life as a mining engineer—a successful and highly-paid member of his profession. In return, Michael had devoted every day of his sojourns in England to his uncle, guarding, and administering to his smallest wants with the tenderness and unselfishness of

a woman. Every luxury the enfeebled old man could enjoy Michael gloried in procuring for him, and he was able to do so, for he had, as Nicolas imagined, speculated successfully in rubber. He never grudged one of the long hours he spent sitting beside the invalid's chair, telling him about the minutest details of his last expedition.

To-night he could not return to his room in his club, for to-night had given Stella back to him, and he did not wish to lose one moment's consciousness of the fact.

He never doubted the possibility of finding her: it was merely a matter of time and patience. Now that she was free, nothing really mattered, nothing was insurmountable. If he could not find her in London, he would write to her father's address in Cairo, and tell his clerk to forward his letter to his mistress.

Then a fresh anger at his own stupidity disturbed him. Why had he allowed her to go without getting her address? If only he had had his wits about him he could have gone to her in the morning and taken her into his arms. To-morrow he might have felt her first kisses on his lips, her slim arms round his neck. He became so impatient at the thought that he had to walk up and down the length of the bridge to calm his restlessness. As he returned to the place he had been leaning over, a woman wrapped in a tattered black shawl crept up to him and held out her hand. He dismissed her instantly. . . . The woman moved away—her obedience was expressive of absolute hopelessness; Michael Ireton called her back. Her tragic eyes were like Stella's, he could not let her go! In his hand were a handful of coins, silver and copper: he held them out to her. The woman looked at him quickly to see if he was drunk, then seized the proffered money with a quick, bird-like claw, and fled into the night.

CHAPTER XXXI

NEXT morning Michael began his search for Stella. His only hope of finding her, by direct means, lay in the chance that Miss MacNaughtan was a member of the Royal Geographical Society.

Soon after ten o'clock he was in the secretary's office, and after a good half-hour's impatient waiting he had the list of the members in front of him. Never, since the days when he had eagerly looked to see if his own name was amongst the successful competitors in his engineering examinations, had he felt so agitated or nervous in reading through a list of names. Twice his heart seemed to stop

beating, when he came across the word MacNaughtan, but it was only a momentary thrill, for in both cases the members were males. With a defeated sigh he threw down the list: there was no Miss MacNaughtan amongst the members. His next plan of action was to spend the entire morning in inspecting the fashionable shops where he thought wealthy girls like Stella would be likely to go.

He first chose Landwools at Knightsbridge, because the shop was associated in his mind with the most beautiful Englishwomen he had seen on his return from savage lands. He took it for granted that almost every woman spent her mornings in London shopping. With the ingenuity born of love, he managed to find some excuse for walking through a greater part of the buildings. Downstairs, charming girls and sumptuously-dressed women were selecting gloves and stockings and laces, and feminine fripperies of all sorts, the cost of which would have appalled Michael Ireton's simple bachelor soul. Upstairs the same class of luxurious shoppers were sitting on comfortable lounges watching young girls parade up and down the showrooms in model gowns.

Michael Ireton was too embarrassed to do more than glance at these lovely creatures, whose faces appeared to him too delicate and too unreal to be human.

Disappointed but not defeated, he went to Harrods. By purchasing some small articles here and there he was at liberty to walk about the various departments of the popular stores. It seemed to him that he had as good a chance of seeing Stella there as of not seeing her. But she was not at Harrods, so he betook himself to the Army and Navy Stores in Victoria Street, where his perseverance was instantly rewarded, for who should he meet coming down the steps of the building into the street but Miss MacNaughtan!

Michael Ireton lifted his hat and stopped abruptly in front of her, but she slipped past him and hurried on. A taxi-cab was waiting for her at the foot of the steps.

"Good morning," she said as she passed him; "so sorry I have no time to speak just now—I must get to Victoria Station by twelve o'clock."

As she stepped into her taxi Michael Ireton, who had followed her, said, "Tell me your address: I must see you."

"233, Prince's Gate, Kensington." But as she said the words a private motor car, with a whistle like a train, passed. As its whistle rent the air her address was swallowed up in its arrogant roar.

Michael cursed the thing with a gorgeous energy. A taxi-cab, passing at the same moment, stopped—he had hailed

it—and as he jumped in he said to the driver, "Do you see that taxi passing that lorry covered with green tarpaulin? If you can overtake it before we get to Victoria Station, or don't lose sight of it when it arrives there, I'll give you a sovereign."

The next moment they were off, and the race began. Michael Ireton strained his eyes to keep the taxi ahead of them well in sight: it had only had the start of him by about a minute, and at the moment the street was singularly clear. His taxi was gaining ground, they would soon be abreast of Miss MacNaughtan! The next moment something in the inner mechanism of the machine jammed and they came to a dead halt. The driver jumped off his seat and opened the door. "Here you are, sir, get into this one"—another taxi was within a yard of him—"and give my pal the quid: he'll do it for you."

"Don't lose sight of that 'ere taxi—it's going to Victoria Station; this gent wants to catch it up—he's good for a quid."

They were off again, but by this time Miss MacNaughtan's taxi was lost in the crowd of other cabs and motors which were pressing their way into the station yard: at least it was lost to Michael, who felt convinced that the driver too had failed to keep his eye on it. But he was wrong. To arrive at the station entrance by keeping in the order of the long line of vehicles would have meant missing Miss MacNaughtan when she got out of one of the front taxis, so Michael jumped out of his when it was about the eighth in order from the one which was being unloaded of its luggage by the porters.

He watched the occupants of the five taxis, which, with three private cars, made up the line of eight which was in front of him. Miss MacNaughtan was not in any of them. He returned to his driver, who had agreed to wait until he had found his friend: "We've lost it; I can't find my friend."

"No, we 'av'n't, sir. I thought I was right: a lady got out of the taxi we was following so quick that I wasn't sure if I was mistaken. She didn't stop to pay the man, but ran as quick as a girl—but she wasn't a girl, sir. Was that who you'd be looking for? Had she on a grey coat, sir?"

Michael Ireton put his hand in his pocket and drew out half a crown: "Take that," he said, "and wait a few moments: I hope I'll have to give you the sovereign."

If Miss MacNaughtan was leaving London by a train that started at twelve o'clock, he had lost her; if she was only going to see some friend off by a train leaving at

that hour, there was hope that he might meet her. He would wait to see if she came out, trusting to luck that she would leave the station by the same exit as she entered, which was likely, as she had not paid for her cab.

Wondering what he had better do if he did not meet her, he walked into the busy station. It was seven minutes past twelve. He stopped under the big clock. As his eyes dropped from looking at its face they suddenly met the laughing and kindly eyes of Miss MacNaughtan staring at him.

He rushed eagerly forward and said, "Ah! I've found you."

"So it seems," she said, still beaming with humour.

"And now that I've found you I'm not going to let you out of my sight until you have told me where you live."

"*My* address!" she said, "why, I called it out to you from the taxi."

"I couldn't hear it. I've been searching for you all the morning—don't laugh, indeed I have; it is the greatest stroke of luck that I have found you now."

"Looking for me?"

"Yes, for you, because *you* can tell me where Miss Lekejian lives: I let you go away last night without getting your address or hers."

"Does Stella wish you to know it?"

"I think so. I made a mistake last night—I thought she was married. When you told me she wasn't . . . I forgot everything else."

They had reached the station exit, so Miss MacNaughtan said quickly, "If you have had time to look for me all over London, you must have time to drive with me while we talk . . ." she smiled good-naturedly . . . "we can't speak here, can we?"

At that moment the taxi-driver who had been waiting for Michael Ireton's return came up. "Begging your pardon, sir, is that the lady you wanted?"

Michael Ireton put his hand in his pocket and took out his sovereign purse. Miss MacNaughtan watched him with a fine light of appreciation twinkling in her eyes. When he had taken a pound out of its neatly fitting abode he said: "You're welcome to it: it's the best-spent sovereign I've ever parted with in London."

"Thank you, sir," the man said; "good luck to you." He was wondering in his heart as he spoke why the fine-looking gentleman's queer eyes glowed with happiness because he had met the grey-haired lady who was certainly old enough to be his aunt.

When they were comfortably settled in the taxi, Miss MacNaughtan said, with the air of frankness which was her most characteristic quality and charm, "I'm afraid you'll be terribly disappointed when I tell you that I was *one* minute too late to say good-bye to Stella . . . she has gone to Switzerland."

"Gone to Switzerland? What ghastly luck! Do you know her address?" His eyes pleaded.

"Yes, but are you certain she would like you to have it? Have I any right to give it? You spoke to her last night—why didn't you ask her for it?"

"I did."

"And she refused . . . then I can't."

"No, I know now that she didn't refuse, I thought she did . . . she was upset by seeing me."

Miss MacNaughtan put her hand lightly on his arm. "I think we must be frank with each other. . . . I love Stella—I brought her up; she is almost my own child."

"And I love her too; I loved her from the first moment I saw her . . . how can I make you believe that she is the only woman I have ever loved?"

Miss MacNaughtan smiled at his direct avowal; she liked the man for his simplicity of speech and determination. "I thought as much," she said: her eyes were smiling contentedly. "You behave like a man in love," she said, "but I like you none the less for it." Her eyes laughed indulgently as she spoke. At the same moment the taxi pulled up at her own door, and Michael Ireton's heart went into his boots. Was she going to send him off without the coveted address? She was kind, but she was tactfully evasive.

It was one of Miss MacNaughton's extravagances to hire taxis from the garage nearest to her house and keep them waiting for her for hours. When her huge account came in at the end of the year she smiled and congratulated herself on the fact that it was not as big as the cost of the upkeep of a motor would be, and there are times when your motor is under repair!

"Won't you come in?" she said, "I'm inquisitive. I want to know more of the man who is going to follow my child to Switzerland . . ." she paused, "shall I say it? . . . of the man who had the power to upset her so last night."

"May I come in? . . . Oh, thank you . . . I should like to see the home Hadassah loved so much."

"You call her Hadassah?"

"Yes, I prefer the old Eastern form of the name 'Esther.'"

They were in the hall by this time, and Miss MacNaughtan

turned to him with one of her impetuous movements. "I think I know *why* you prefer to call her Hadassah. . . . I'm glad of it . . ."

He did not speak; he was following her upstairs.

"Clarkson!" Miss MacNaughton called out.

"Yes, mum."

"I want lunch for two in the library. Tell Miss Bateson not to wait for me—let them begin their lunch at once." She turned to Michael: "You can stay and have a scrap of lunch with me in my study. I have a lecture at 2.40, until then we can talk. Are you free?"

Michael Ireton was looking round the room; he was feeling Stella's near presence, he was thinking of the years she had passed in an atmosphere like this, of beauty and refinement. He had never been in her Arab home in Cairo, so he did not know that the girl's whole life had been spent in the midst of beauty. "What charming surroundings for a girl like Hadassah to be brought up in!" he said; "what an ideal school!"—he smiled—"but *is* it a school really?"

"Yes, truly. It is one of my hobbies to instil the love of beauty into girls when they are young. I have an idea that if they really worship beauty they will be disgusted by all that is *un*lovely." Her eyes expressed the fuller meaning of her words.

"I quite agree with you: Hadassah is an excellent illustration of your theory."

"Luncheon is served, mum." It was Clarkson's voice that interrupted them.

When they were eating their admirably cooked soles Michael Ireton said: "It is very kind of you to let me do this."

"Do what? Eat your lunch with me?"

"Yes, I am practically a stranger to you!"

"That's the very reason why I asked you," she said "I want to know you."

"I see," he said: "all the same it's very kind of you: you might have turned me off—it gives me hope."

"Like a severe schoolmistress."

He smiled, the smile which made the woman like him still more.

"I will tell you Stella's address," she said, "if you will explain why you thought she refused it to you last night."

"When I met her last night I thought she was married. . . . I mistook her emotion when I asked her if I might come and see her for refusal. . . . I don't know why she was so upset by seeing me: she said a great many dreadful things had happened since we had met last. Can you tell me?"

"You don't know, perhaps, about her cousin Girgis Boutros's tragic death?—it has changed her whole life."

"Is he dead? . . . that magnificent fellow . . . what happened? . . . was there some tragedy? . . . he was very unlike the usual native."

While Miss MacNaughtan told him the story of Girgis's death, Michael Ireton remained silent. When she had finished he said: "You don't think Hadassah ever loved him?" His voice broke slightly as he spoke; the woman's heart was touched for the man's fear.

"No, oh no! He was her cousin, but . . . well, how can I explain everything?"

"I know," he said; "I thought not, I hoped not."

There was silence for a moment.

"You said his death had something to do with her engagement with Vernon Thorpe being broken off?"

"Yes, it was the loophole for her escape! She had fallen *out* of love with him long before Girgis's death? Every woman loves being adored, and in England, at any rate Vernon adored her. . . . The dullest sort of Englishman have quite a gift for love-making—that is to say, love-making when things are on the footing of intimate courtship . . . and he is very good-looking." They both laughed.

"Your cult of the beautiful, bearing fruit—his beauty made her love him."

"Yes, but his mind . . . is it beautiful?"

"I don't know, I know nothing about him . . . but what earthly chance have I compared to him? . . . and yet . . ." he looked across the table eagerly at his companion, "I will be truthful. Before I knew she was engaged I though I *had* a chance; after she told me, of course I realised that ours must be merely an intellectual affinity. . . ." He thought for a moment. "Later on in Cairo, the last time I saw her, I fancied she cared, but it could only have been that she was troubled, that she leaned on me as a friend. . . . You who know her so well, will you be brutally frank and tell me if I've any chance. . . . God knows I adore her truly; you needn't be afraid to tell me the truth . . . I left her when I thought it was for her happiness, I can leave her again. . . . I hope I love her well enough to think of her happiness first."

"I think you have a *chance*," she said, "because you are persistent and insistent, and because you evidently are more than *negative* to her: your sudden appearance upset her to a very great extent last night.

"It may have been that I reminded her of our last meeting, at which the accident happened to Mr. Thorpe

when he saved her father's life." As he spoke he remembered Stella's cry of "Stay, don't go! I want you."

"Don't be down-hearted," Miss MacNaughtan said lightly: "Yesterday afternoon I did *not* think Stella was in love with anyone, in fact she was very much out of love with every one; she was delighted that she had escaped from the trammels of love; she was congratulating herself on the fact that she could now carry out her scheme of work in Egypt . . . has she ever mentioned it to you? But she is looking very ill . . . I feel quite anxious about her . . . she has gone through so much."

Michael Ireton's mind was concentrated on the scheme of work Stella had once laid before him. "She has spoken of her desire to work amongst the women."

"Then you are more than a mere ordinary friend: there are things we only tell to people we care for, even if these things are no secrets."

"I want to help her in that work and I want her to know that . . . will you tell her?"

"You would live with her *in* Cairo?"

"Certainly—why not? . . . if she knows me at all she knows I would," his face rolled into smiles . . . "where wouldn't I live with her, I should like to know? It would be a strange place."

Miss MacNaughtan laughed. "You are very thoroughgoing about it," she said; "it is rather refreshing in these unromantic days."

"I fell in love with her at first sight; I would have married her the next day if I could. You may think me mad or anything else you like, but I'm not. I am simply determined to win . . . I have seldom been defeated."

"Love is madness," Miss MacNaughtan said, "a beautiful madness, but still a pronounced form of mania." She looked at her wrist-watch. "I must go soon—I have a history lecture at 2.40. . . ." She rose to go.

"One minute," he said, "you didn't finish what you were saying: I interrupted you."

"Saying? What about?"

"You said that in the afternoon you were convinced that Hadassah was heart-whole . . . did you not think so . . . later on . . . after we met in the evening?"

"After she met you, do you mean?"

"Yes, I mean that . . . you began your sentence as if you were going to say something about a change in your opinions."

Miss MacNaughtan looked at him with serious eyes. "Would it be fair to Stella to say what I thought?" she asked. . . . "Go and try your luck . . . they are going

to Lucerne if they find it suits her father . . . you know that he is very ill. They are going to stay at the Schweitzerhof Hotel for a month."

The moment he heard the address Michael Ireton had the air of a man ready for instant flight.

Miss MacNaughtan held out her hand. "Now be off with you: I know you mean to catch the night boat from Dover, and I have to interest my girls in the Seventh Crusade."

"Good-bye," he said; "wish me good luck in my first crusade of Love."

"You have my best wishes," she said, "but go gently, for at the present moment your Hadassah is sick of love."

CHAPTER XXXII

In the evening of the day following Michael Ireton walked into the Schweitzerhof Hotel at Lucerne. He had travelled without stopping since three o'clock the day before, but he was as spotlessly clean and carefully dressed as though he had been leading an idle and luxurious life in the fashionable Swiss resort for weeks. He had driven from the station to a smaller hotel, where he had engaged a room for one day; there he had deposited his luggage and changed his travel-stained clothes and had had a bath. He was boyishly fastidious about his appearance before presenting himself to the Lekejians.

In the hall of the hotel he asked to see the visitors' book; he examined the list of people staying in the hotel very carefully. The Lekejians' name was not amongst them. His mood of confidence changed to one of doubt.

He went to the large letter-rack which hung on the wall and scanned the addresses of the letters awaiting the arrival of coming travellers; there was nothing in the rack addressed to any one of the Lekejian family. With a feeling of approaching defeat, he went to the booking-office and asked if a family called Lekejian, the friends with whom he had come to stay, were in the hotel.

The clerk looked up. "What name, sir? Did you say Lekejian? No, sir; they were expected this morning, but we had a telegram last night cancelling their rooms . . . they have not left England on account of illness—Mr. Lekejian is very ill. He has stayed here many times, sir; we are extremely sorry."

"Thank you," Michael Ireton said. "Do you know where they are staying in England?"

The man referred to the telegram. "No, sir, there is no

address, but they had not left Dover when this was sent off." He handed Michael the telegram.

"Thank you."

"Do you wish a room, sir?"

"Not now, I will return to England. Will you send a telegram for me? I will dine here and wait for a reply."

"Certainly, sir."

Michael Ireton wrote out the wire: it was to Miss MacNaughtan: "Mr. Lekejian ill, not left Dover. Have you any information? If you have please send it, also Dover address."

At 8.30 he got his reply.

"Leaving Dover for Cairo. Mr. Lekejian wishes to return via Marseilles."

The telegram fell out of Michael's hand. He was making a pretence of eating something of the very good dinner which the hotel provided for the table d'hôte.

A great pity for Hadassah swept over him; for the moment it wiped out all personal feeling. If he could only write and tell her how sorry he was for her! for undoubtedly Mr. Lekejian must be very ill. It seemed to him as though his gentle Hadassah was only to pass out of one affliction to go into another.

The details of her cousin Girgis's death had been in his mind very vividly during the long journey from London. He knew that the boy had offered up his life for Egypt because he was not strong enough to live without Hadassah's love; what it meant in the way of courage and fight to live without Hadassah he knew only too well.

He knew that this fragile girl held the sweetness and dearness of life for him in the palm of her little hand; he knew that if she sent him away, as Girgis had been sent away when he offered himself to her, the world would be, not unendurable, as it had been to Girgis, for with fortitude all things are endurable, but it would be scentless and soulless . . . a mere earth with no flowers for its Eden.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THERE were sorrow and mourning in the old Mamluk house in Cairo: Nicolas Lekejian was dead, and Hadassah would not be comforted. Unlike the Eastern women of old, who tore their hair and beat their breasts and yelled upon the house-tops when their nearest and dearest were borne with loud manifestations of sorrow to their place among the dead, Stella had remained tearless and unemotional until

long days of pent-up feeling and sleepless nights of remorse had ended in a collapse of nerve and body.

Without doubt Nicolas Lekejian had died from the shock his system had received when Girgis Boutros was arrested with his fellow-conspirators, and Stella could not help holding herself in a measure responsible for her cousin's death. If she had taken more pains to discover what the work was he meant to do for Egypt she could have prevented him acting as he did; hence she felt herself to be not only responsible for her cousin's death, but in a measure for her father's also.

It was absurd, of course, but natural in the highly strung state of her nerves and sensibilities. In long hours of sleeplessness she exaggerated every unwise step she had taken and foolish thing she had said. Her own beauty and her quality of attraction became an accursed thing in her eyes.

Her father's love, the love that had been torn from her just when she needed it most, was the only love her mind could tolerate or dwell upon.

If Michael Ireton had come to her and said, "I love you madly, Hadassah," if he had repeated the very words of her heart's song, the song she had never been able to silence since he had first said the words, she would have turned from him with shrinking and horror. To love Michael now would seem as dishonourable to her dead father's memory as it had seemed dishonourable to Vernon, when she was his promised wife.

. . . . . .

And Michael Ireton did come! He came one day when Mrs. Lekejian was sitting by her daughter, hoping and praying that for a little time the girl would sleep, that for a little time the tragic eyes would close and the restless limbs would rest. His card was handed to her while Stella's face was turned to the wall. She rose quietly and left the room, bidding the servant follow her; Stella cared too little about what was happening to even ask herself why her mother was going without first explaining her reason for leaving her so suddenly.

"Tell him," she said to the servant, "that I cannot see him; explain that we have sorrow in the house, and illness." Mrs. Lekejian spoke quietly.

"I did tell him that our dear master is dead, *sitt*, and he was very sad; I told him, my lady, because he said that he had been looking for you all over Europe—the big tall, man is very much in love! He asked to see Miss Hadassah."

Mrs. Lekejian smiled at the man's sympathy for the

impatient lover. In Arabic, this fine arrangement of his sentences had been graced with the flowers of his elegant language.

Mrs. Lekejian's Irish heart melted: she would go and see the big, tall man for a few minutes.

When her slight figure, in widow's weeds, entered the room where Michael Ireton was nervously waiting, he almost cried out with surprise . . . never before had he thought her the least like Hadassah! Now, with the tragedy of her recent loss deepening the beauty of her violet eyes, he recognised many points of Stella in her Irish mother.

He strode forward and held out his hand. Something better than words of sympathy was in the grasp he gave her and in the expression of tenderness which, like a divine light, transformed his rough face.

They had not seen each other since the night when Vernon had saved her husband's life, and the sudden recollection of it brought a lump into both their throats. They remained silent. With a gentle caress Michael Ireton at last let her hand drop; still in silence they stood looking at each other while his eyes seemed to say, "We will not speak of your sorrow, you need not be afraid—the sorrow of death is sacred." Feeling this she grew braver and said gently, "You wanted to see my daughter?"

"Yes," he said; "is it permitted? . . . May I? . . . Will you allow me?"

He looked at her to see if she realised his deeper meaning.

"Stella is ill," she said—"too unnerved to see any one."

"Ill?" he said in alarm.

"A nervous breakdown; she will be all right again with quiet and care."

"Your daughter and I were friends, Mrs. Lekejian . . . Do you really think it would do her harm to see me . . .?"

"I know you were great friends, but she is really too ill, it would not be wise at present—the doctor would forbid it."

"I can *wait*," he said doggedly, "I can go on waiting . . . I have waited . . . but don't you think she would see me if she knew I was here, if she knew how far I had travelled in the hopes of seeing her, and what difficulty I have had in finding you?"

Mrs. Lekejian smiled: the man was not to be easily dismissed.

His eyes brightened. "If it is only nervous collapse, it might do her good to see an old friend. Will you beg her to see me," he said, "if only for five minutes? Tell her I have never stopped looking for her since the night I saw her at the Royal Geographical Society's lecture."

Without a word Mrs. Lekejian turned and left the room and did what he asked. When she saw that Stella was not sleeping she said quite simply, "Stella, Michael Ireton is waiting in the drawing-room; he has begged me to ask you if you will see him, if only for five minutes. Will you dear?—he is terribly insistent!"

"Michael Ireton!" The cry of the words rang through the room as Stella uttered them: the next moment she had drawn the bed-clothes over her face. "Oh, mother, don't let him come, he loves me . . . don't let me hear the word Love ever again: it was Love that killed Girgis, it was the Love I thought I had for Vernon—it was Love that brought about all this unhappiness . . . I hate the very name of Love."

"Since when has he loved you, dearest?"

There was no answer, but a nervous sigh.

"He seems strong and big and true, poor fellow! Is he to be sent away because my child happens to be cross and peevish?"

"Oh, mother, I want only you—I want to be left alone. Love has gone out of me: I will never love again."

"My dearest, you needn't see him, he *will* leave you alone; but what about the future? When you are well again, won't you be sorry? Are you doing wisely?"

"When I am well again I want to work, not to love."

"Will he prevent it?"

Stella hesitated. "Perhaps not . . . but don't you see, mother, Love stopped all my work before, it might stop it again."

"Then you think you *might* love him if you saw him?"

"I don't know . . . I'm afraid of myself . . . supposing I never can love: I thought I loved Vernon: perhaps it is only that I love being made love to."

"You were too young to know."

There was a moment's silence.

"What must I tell him, dear? . . . I think he has suffered."

"Tell him I am sorry, mother, that is all."

Mrs. Lekejian put her hand on her child's forehead and looked into her eyes. "Dearest, I know very little about this man, but what I have seen of him I like and admire, and something tells me that, if you send him away comfortless, you are sending away your happiness."

"Do you want me to leave you, mother?"

"My dear, perverse child, of course I don't." She smiled tenderly: "I will tell him you are sorry . . . is that all? . . . he has waited, Stella, he *says* he will go on waiting . . . but will you give him no hope? He has

crossed Europe to see you—can you expect his feelings to remain the same if you think only of your own and nothing of his ? "

Mrs. Lekejian waited.

" Tell him I am going to work for Egypt if ever I am well enough to do anything again . . . he approved of the idea . . . tell him that, mother ; tell him that all my life I am going to work . . . it will be my atonement."

Mrs. Lekejian went out of the room and shut the door, but she did not go down stairs, she knew her daughter and human nature too well.

When the door was closed, Stella burst into a flood of tears, such relieving tears that much sorrow and striving and fear seemed to pass away with them. . . . She called to her mother to come back. . . . " Mother, mother, how beastly I've been, how hateful ! Mother, *do* come back. . . . You might have known that I didn't mean it. . . . Oh ! say something kind—*he* is so kind."

As though she had heard the cry the next moment Mrs. Lekejian was by her side.

" Mother ! "

" You called me, dear ? "

Stella did not answer.

" What kind thing shall I tell him, dear ? "

" I am thinking."

" Take your time . . . he can wait. He'd wait for seven years like Jacob, I think."

" He has been so kind, mother, and I wasn't fair to him, not fair from the very first . . . I was selfish and cruel."

" Yes, dearest," Mrs. Lekejian said again. This time the old humour, that was hard to kill, lurked in her eyes . . . she was perfectly certain Stella cared for the tall, big man downstairs.

" Ask him, mother, if he will go away and let me work out my own salvation . . . ask him to go away for a whole year, tell him not to write to me or to think of me unless he can't help it, and at the end of the year, this very day year, if he likes he can write to me and ask me if he may come and see me . . . only don't promise *anything*, mother . . . let him be free . . . and let me be absolutely free . . . I must be free, or I shall hate him."

" Poor fellow ! "

" If I saw him now, mother, I shouldn't even say that ; I can only say it through you."

Stella laid herself down again wearily. " I'm so tired, mother ; send him away."

" I know you are, dear—try and sleep. I will go and

comfort him as best I can. I know you are not in a fit state to be troubled, but this may mean your happiness."

Michael Ireton was standing with his back to the door when Mrs. Lekejian entered. He turned swiftly round. "How long you have been!" he said. "Will she see me?"

"She is really not well enough to see you . . . I am so sorry," she spoke with a kindly little shake of the head . . . "It is wiser not to urge it."

"Did she not even send me a message? If you only knew how much it means to me!"

"I think I do . . . and she is not unkind; remember her system has had a severe shock. You must make allowances —she is very highly strung, she craves for rest for body and soul."

"I understand," he said, "but will you let me hope? You have always been so kind, will you accept me if ever Stella does?"

"Yes, I will accept you and I will hope for you because I believe that my daughter cares for you, and that her future happiness lies in your hands, although just at present all suggestion of any such love as you feel for her is odious to her. Do you understand? . . . I wonder if any man can? . . . it is not you, it is the idea of love itself after . . ." she looked at him, pleading his full understanding of her words.

"I know," he said, "I can wait . . . I can go on waiting . . . I have waited for her all my life."

"Death has been too near to us," she said softly, "for the child to think of love . . . it hurts her."

"I can wait," he repeated.

"Stella has sent you a message!"

Michael Ireton looked eagerly at the sensitive face, again so reminiscent of Stella.

"She asks you not to write to her or think about her for a year"—she smiled—"that is to say, if you can help it: these are Stella's own words." A light of sympathy shone in her eyes for the man whose face had fallen like a child's.

"At the end of the year . . . this very day year," she said, "if you still care you may write. . . . No! no, go slowly, there is no *promise*, nothing really definite . . . but it is the most hopeful plan, even if it seems hard; but remember you are to be free, absolutely free."

"I'll come," he said, drawing out his watch, "at 6.45 this day year."

Mrs. Lekejian laughed. "You certainly deserve to succeed—but don't feel too certain: remember Stella only told me to tell you that you may *write* to her at the

end of the year if . . . if you have not forgotten her, if you still feel for her as you do now . . . these were her very words."

He sighed—it was the sigh of a man who had been strung to the limit of endurance. "I must be thankful," he said.

Mrs. Lekejian put her hand on his. "She is more than half won already, I think, but she doesn't know it; or if she does she is rebelling against it for the time being."

"I understand: my best chance is to go away—I will take your advice."

"Yes, go away and allow her to miss you!" she smiled, "and she *will* miss you, for every woman needs devotion, and Stella has always had it."

"A year is such a long time," he said; "supposing some one else offers her that devotion."

"Would she be worth the winning if any man's love would do?"

"What's worth and what isn't worth doesn't enter into love: once the malady's ripe, it's a terrible thing."

"You are quite right, it is a terrible thing, a cruel thing. But I must return to Stella. You are strong, be brave; you are not like poor Girgis, who looked so strong and was so weak."

"I mean to live for her . . . Girgis died for her . . . that is the difference."

He raised her hand to his lips. "Pray God you may be my mother some day," he said earnestly. "Good-bye."

CHAPTER XXXIV

It was the hour of sunset in Cairo—that magic hour in the East when the most worldly mind is moved by the Infinite Being of God. Stella Lekejian was coming out of the Coptic schoolroom where she had been teaching. Her long day's work was done!

Her pupils, all closely veiled women belonging to the lower-middle classes, were hurrying in twos and three, to their various homes. Some of them, though wives and mothers, were girls just emerging from childhood. To the casual observer these closely veiled figures looked like ordinary Cairene Moslem women—their shapeless black garments differed not one whit from all the others—but on a closer examination you could see that their dark eyes, whose heavy lids were blackened with kohl, were larger and more elongated, and that they inclined slightly upwards from the nose. Also, if you looked, you could find, among the tattoo marks which decorated their wrists and

faces, the distinguishing sign of their sect—a little cross, the emblem of Christ's suffering.

Their attitude towards Stella resembled the devotion of English Sunday-School children to their teachers. Each day they brought her little bunches of odorous jasmine and early sprays of tuberose. During the year she had worked amongst them and held meetings of various kinds, in the beautiful little school-house which her mother had built and endowed as a memorial to her father, Stella had endeared herself to these primitive women.

At first they had only come in twos and threes, and had shrunk from any form of intimacy, but gradually their numbers had increased until the largest class-room in the building was not big enough to hold them. She had been wise enough to leave religious instruction and discussions alone, for although her father had been a strict Uniat-Copt all his life, she herself had been brought up in the Church of England, and in Cairo the English Protestants are almost as much disliked by the various sects of the Copts as are the members of the Greek Church. Between the Copts and the Greeks there is an undying feud.

During the year her busy life had left her little time for reflection ; but it gave her the satisfaction of feeling that she was at last of some practical good in the world, that her reason for existence was justified—and, oddly enough, the trivial things of life, the things she had once envied, were now offered to her ungrudgingly. She would have found a warm welcome in most of the houses of the resident English in Cairo if she had chosen to go there, for suddenly their doors had been opened to her! She never even questioned the reason why this change had taken place in their attitude towards her, for she was now far more than formerly in close touch with the native population. There was only one house she visited, for the iron of bitterness had entered her soul too deeply, in the days of her impressionable girlhood, ever to allow her to accept even the most sincerely offered tokens of hospitality and friendship. It was only in the house of a celebrated lady doctor, whose kindness to the poor had won Stella's admiration and devotion, that she was perfectly happy. It was when she saw the husband and wife working together in the common cause of humanity—for they were both doctors—that she used to dream dreams of what happiness might be hers when her year of probation was over. In the years to come perhaps Michael and she would work together and play together and find life sweet together, as these two friends did.

On this particular evening, as Stella followed the little

company of Coptic women from the door of their schoolhouse, whose pleasant courtyard was shaded with an ancient sycamore tree and one tall Victoria palm, her mind was disturbed with personal emotions. She had felt herself incapable of putting aside her own interests and throwing herself wholeheartedly into her work as she usually did. She had received a letter from Michael Ireton in the morning and it had been fluttering in her bosom like the wings of a bird. It was in reality lying securely in its envelope in her pocket, yet she felt it in her bosom like a living thing trying to get free—a thing trying to gain dominion over her struggling senses. She had not heard from him since she had sent him away.

She had tried to banish him from her mind for her work's sake, and, as a test of the enduring quality of her love for him during the period she had fixed for their separation, she had determined to work with one sole purpose in view—the regeneration of the Egyptian women. If at the end of a year's time Michael still cared for her and she still cared for him, surely their love would be enduring.

Now, in this supreme hour of Egypt's beauty, when the spell of its light was transforming the world into a kingdom of heavenly glory, Stella unreservedly surrendered herself to the joy of her new happiness. It seemed to her, as she watched the black-robed figures of the Coptic women disappearing into the golden distance, that the whole world was bathed in a flame of Love : she let it envelop her until she was lost in its mystery. Only the golden silence and the limitless space of wondrous light existed.

CHAPTER XXXV

The next morning Stella asked her mother if they might have their morning coffee and fruit in the *mandarah*—the large apartment on the ground floor of the house, where, in days gone by, only male visitors were received.

They were sitting on a low seat encircling the wide window which looked out upon the courtyard, in the portion of the room called the *durkaah*. Here the marble floor was sunk about six or seven inches, and in its centre was a beautiful fountain, composed of three shallow basins raised on a slender shaft, one above the other.

It was a delightful apartment in the hot weather, for the plash, plash of the falling water was cooling to the senses, and the entire absence of any kind of furniture, kept the atmosphere pure and fresh. Their coffee was placed on

a white marble table of classic shape, such as one sees in the best houses in Pompei.

The morning post had just arrived, but the appearance of a number of letters had not interrupted the absorbing conversation between mother and daughter. They were discussing the momentous question of Michael Ireton's letter and of his arrival in Cairo the night before.

"Yes, he has waited for a whole year, but I didn't ask him to, mother—he needn't have done it! He was perfectly free to choose any other girl. Don't look like that." Stella held out her hand imploringly.

"I didn't mean to look like anything, dear," her mother said laughingly, "but to me it seems so strange, so unnecessary, when you might have been together: there are none too many years allotted to any of us for youth and happiness—you'll find that, my darling—why squander one of them?"

"But I've not squandered it, mother, it has been a precious year—it has given me heaps of things, and a kind of happiness I never knew before. I've been doing work I love, work Michael knows I never mean to give up, and at the same time I've tested the endurance of my feelings for him and of his for me." She sighed contentedly. "You can't think how much each day of this year has added to my love for him, and from his letter, I don't think he cares for me any the less."

"I'm so thankful, dearest, and I believe he is almost worthy of you; I liked the little I saw of him, and your father admired him."

"Almost!" the girl spoke scornfully—"almost! he's worth a hundred of me."

"To me, darling, naturally no man is quite good enough for you . . . but certainly you could never be happy with a man who had not exceptional brains and a strong individuality."

"I understood him and he understood me—at least, we were in perfect sympathy with each other from the very first moment we met . . . and as the days went by in Luxor his companionship showed me how very little I had in common with Vernon Thorpe."

"And knowing all this, Stella, you have made the poor man wait for a whole year after all he had suffered while you were engaged. Poor fellow."

A pause in the conversation followed, while Mrs. Lekejian took up her letters and glanced at the handwritings on the envelopes. "One from Nancy," she said brightly, "and . . . how strange! one from Nicolas as well." She started. "Why . . . they are both from the same hotel." She

pointed to the name of the hotel stamped on the envelopes. When she had only read a few words she cried out, "Stella, they're married! Listen. . . ."

"My Darling Mother and Stella,

"Nicolas and I were married this morning, and I'm the happiest girl in the world. I will tell you all about everything and how it came to pass, when we meet—it's quite a romance. We are just off to Italy, where we are going to 'moon' for a heavenly fortnight. Then we sail from Naples, and will be with you in about three weeks. Nicolas says we are all to go up the Nile by Cook's first pleasure boat, so do make plans, and don't disappoint us.

"Your loving daughter,

"Nancy Lekejian.

"P.S.—This is the first time I've signed myself Lekejian except in church in the register."

Mrs. Lekejian's whole being was expressive of an almost girlish delight. Her affection for Nancy was very genuine, and she knew how deeply her son had felt his unselfish renunciation of the girl's love for him. She looked to Stella for the sympathy she knew she would receive.

"I'm so glad, so tremendously glad," Stella said. "Dear little Nancy, how happy they will be! I suppose they are eating their breakfast together as husband and wife! What fun! Be quick, darling, and open Nicolas's letter. I do wonder if he will tell us how it happened, I so want to know all about it."

Mrs. Lekejian's voice was breathless with excitement as she read aloud her son's brief announcement of his marriage.

"Darling Mother,

"Nancy is now my wife, and I am the happiest man on God's earth. I can't write, but we shall both see you soon, and I know that you will rejoice at my happiness.

"Your loving son,

"Nicolas."

"Now that he's a celebrity I suppose he considered himself more worthy of being her husband . . . dear old Nicolas. . . ." Stella spoke tenderly, then suddenly she gave a nervous sigh. "Mother, I'm afraid to-day's going to be too good to be true." Do you think anything will happen to him before he gets here?" she said anxiously. "Nancy's good news and mine seem really too much."

At that very moment a servant came with gliding native movements up the long room to where they sat. With a low salaam at his mistress's knees, he said, "A gentleman has

arrived, *sitt*, but he says he will wait if he is too early ; it is the ' tall big ' gentleman, *sitt*."

Stella's face flushed crimson. " Oh, mother, it's Michael ! "

She looked nervously round the room : at that moment she would have escaped if she could. The joy of expecting him had been too suddenly terminated by his arrival—she would gladly have postponed it ; but Mrs. Lekejian, understanding this side of her daughter's complex nature, rose from her seat very quickly and left the room. " I will send him to you, Stella," she said ; " don't be foolish —you are not a child—and do give him the welcome he deserves." She looked at the moment much more pleased than her shrinking daughter. But her voice had laughter lurking in it, though it was stern enough to bring Stella quickly up against the fact that her future happiness did depend upon her self-control in the next few moments.

When her mother met Michael Ireton she said, " So the year has passed and you have come : you need not explain." He grasped her hand gratefully. " I give my child to you willingly, for I know that she loves you and you will make her happy. Yusuf will take you to her . . . she is waiting for you." She held his hand in hers for a moment longer . . . " You will be wise, Michael, I think, to take the bull by the horns . . . Stella is frightfully nervous." Her merry eyes expressed clearly all that she could not tell him. As she hurried away she said, " Go to her quickly ; I will see you later on."

When Michael Ireton entered the room he did not hesitate to take Mrs. Lekejian's advice : in two strides he seemed to cross its great length and reach the window where Stella was standing, nervously waiting for him. Without one word of greeting he swiftly enfolded her in his arms.

. . . . . .

" No," he said, " not yet, don't try to struggle. . . . You are mine, mine at last and for ever." He bent his head to her shrinking face and covered it with kisses, kisses which made the girl realise how utterly useless it was to protest. Her moment of surrender had come.

Nor did she wish to protest, for the joy of experiencing the strength of his manhood, of at last feeling the comfort of his strong embrace, was exquisite to her senses.

With his lips on her lips she felt as though she was floating through a world of space, to some unknown shore, in the strong arms of love.

And when he held her passionately from him, at arm's length, to look at her with ardent eyes, she said ; " Dearest, can you forgive me ? "

"Tell me you love me, and I will forgive you everything, all the waiting and the hunger of years."

"I love you," she said simply, "more than anything in all the world; I have always loved you."

"Then, darling, why did you send me away? why did you waste one year of our life?"

She was crushed to him tenderly again: his hunger for the nearness of her beauty, for the fragrance of her being, was demanding its justification. "How could you have done it? How could you?"

"I did it," she said, "because I wanted to know if my love was worthy of you. I was afraid: it was for your sake, for the sake of our love!"

He drew her back to him, "you worthy of me!—how could you doubt it? . . . Oh, my darling."

"I had to do it, the Fates made me; I can't explain just why, but they did. It's all over now," she gave a tired sigh, a sigh of perfect content, a sigh of absolute thankfulness for his presence and for the acknowledgment of their love.

"The waiting was worth it," he said eagerly, "if it has done what you wished: I would have waited a thousand years."

"It has done far more! Things could never have been so wonderful if I hadn't learned to know how much I wanted you, how much I missed you, how afraid I grew that you might love some one else."

"Then thank God I waited," Michael Ireton said briefly "but you are not going to send me away again, Hadassah, with any more indefinite promises. I am going to make you my wife whether you will or won't!"

"But I will, dearest—I am ready." With an exquisite shyness she kissed him for the first time without his demanding it. "I will whenever you like; I know now that I'm not afraid."

"Thank God!" he said, "but I can hardly believe it's true, things have been so hard . . . so hard and cruel, and now everything seems too good to be true."

"I think we certainly must do something to appease the jealousy of the gods," she held up her silver hand of Fatma; "yet we have surely suffered enough, and I have worn this so constantly Fatma ought to reward us by averting their envious eyes."

"And this," Michael said, raising the rough heart of green stone. His eyes reminded her of the day he found it in the temple of Luxor. A warm blush dyed her face as his eyes insisted upon her answer.

"I hope it will do its work, dearest, for women when they love are the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever."

He pressed his lips to her hand which held the ancient amulet—an ecstasy of passion shone in his eyes as his mind travelled out to meet hers in the days that were to come.

"It is so glorious, Michael, to know that we may love each other, to know that you may do as you once said you could do if you might, and now you may!"

"What was that? What did I say?"

"You once said, 'I could love you madly, Hadassah, if I might.' I have never forgotten it . . . often and often I have driven the words from my ears, often and often I have wanted to feel that 'mad love' . . . it was horrible to know that I had to stamp on it and crush it and kill it, that your dear affection was all wrong."

"And yet, when I found you and you were free, you sent me away. . . . I thought you didn't care for me." Again he said, "How could you?"

"I was ill, I was sick of the very name of love—love had brought such misery, Michael: poor Girgis loved me; if I had never thought that I loved Vernon, how much sorrow and remorse would have been saved!"

"I know, dearest. I was a selfish brute to come at that time—I should have waited; but that night when Vernon saved your father's life I thought you cared . . . it gave me the courage; I thought you cared when you asked me to stay."

"And so I did," she said, "I cared from the very first time I saw you, I have always cared; I think I must have cared for you in my former incarnation."

. . . . . .

It was after midday when Mrs. Lekejian returned to the *mandarah*. She entered it a little nervously, for it is always an unpleasant duty to disturb lovers, but Michael Ireton put her instantly at her ease by saying: "Hadassah has promised to marry me as soon as it can be managed: will you accept me as your son?" He stooped down and kissed her, thinking to himself as he did so how delightful a thing it would be to have this gentle personality, this woman whose blue eyes could never wholly banish their smiles, for his mother-in-law.

She turned swiftly to Stella, while she held out her two hands to Michael: "I'm so glad! I knew she loved you" —her eyes warmed to the man who seemed to tower above her like a giant—"but I knew you would have to capture her by strategy if you wished to marry her. . . ." Her voice trembled. "You will be good to my baby . . . I heard that my son was married yesterday . . . I shall be all alone now."

He held her slender hands in his two big ones more

tightly. "Indeed, you won't be alone; there's surely plenty of room for us all here . . ." he looked round the splendid hall. "For at least six months in each year I've promised to help Hadassah with her work—not to hinder it, you know—and for the rest of the year we're going to live wherever our fancy pleases us . . . wherever you and Hadassah think best."

Tears sprang into Mrs. Lekejian's eyes. "Then you won't take her away from me? How kind! I should be quite alone!"

Stella flung her arms round her mother's neck: "Michael is really the nicest thing that ever happened," she said, "the nicest thing in the whole world: he couldn't do a nasty or cruel thing if he tried: he would never take me away from you. He's going to have a mother now to spoil him, as well as a wife." She turned her love-bright eyes to her lover: "Mother's a darling, Michael; she'll not be a bit an 'in-law,' for she's really much younger than I am." She paused. "I grew up the first time I ever saw you; mother has never really grown up yet . . ." Stella scanned her mother tenderly from head to foot, and then looked at her lover—"but she'll just have to look a little older now, if she's going to have you for an 'in-law' . . . you're such a big thing, dear, I think you ought to be able to take care of us both."

By way of answering her he put a protecting arm round each of the women and drew them to him. "I'll do my best," he said simply; "God knows how I mean to try."

"If only father had known," Stella said, "there would have been nothing left to wish for."

"But he does know, dear, I never doubt that . . . I couldn't live and doubt it."

As Mrs. Lekejian said the words Michael Ireton understood the reason how, in spite of all her suffering, she had kept her child's heart, and why her husband had so adored her. One moment before he had thought his human happiness could not be added to, but the expression in her eyes had suddenly shown him fresh reasons for gratitude; a new chord had awakened in his manhood—the tenderness of a son for his mother. "Little mother," he said, "I will do my utmost to make his child happy and to be a good son to his wife."

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